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LOVER OR FRIEND?

LOVER OR FRIEND?

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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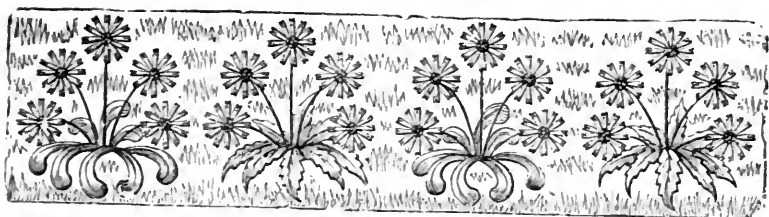
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LOVER OR FRIEND?

CHAPTER I.

‘OLIVE WILL ACKNOWLEDGE ANYTHING.’

‘Evil, like a rolling stone upon a mountain-top,
A child may first impel, a giant cannot stop.’

TRENCH.

‘By despising himself too much, a man comes to be worthy of his own contempt.’—AMIEL.

AUDREY was sure it was the east wind that made everyone so unlike themselves the next morning. Bailey had told her that the wind was decidedly easterly, or, perhaps, more strictly speaking, north-east. She had run down the garden to speak to him about some plants, and perhaps with some intention of intercepting Cyril when he went across to breakfast, and they had had quite a confabulation on the subject.

But when she got back to the house she found rather a subdued state of things. Mrs. Ross looked tired ; her husband had kept her awake by his restlessness, and she had got it firmly in her mind that a fit of gout was impending. Dr. Ross had once had a touch of gout—a very slight touch, to be sure—but it had given him a wholesome fear of the complaint, and had implanted in him a deep distrust of other men's port wine ; and his devoted wife had never forgotten the circumstance.

‘And I am sure,’ she observed in an undertone to her daughter, ‘that if I were not quite certain that there is nothing troubling your father—for, of course, he would have told me of it at once—I should have said there was something on his mind, for he tossed and groaned so ; but mark my words, Audrey, it is his old enemy, the gout ; and if only I could induce him to speak to Dr. Pilkington we might ward it off still.’

‘What is that you are telling the child, Emmie?’ asked the Doctor, who had very sharp ears. ‘Gout ! stuff and nonsense ! I never was better in my life.’

‘I think your complexion looks a little sallow this morning, John,’ returned Mrs. Ross rather

timidly, for she knew her husband's objection to any form of ailment; 'and I am sure you never closed your eyes all night.' But at this Dr. Ross pished impatiently, and it was then that Audrey hazarded her brilliant suggestion about the east wind.

'Michael looks rather limp, too,' she went on; 'and he never could endure an east wind.'

'Have your own way, Audrey,' returned her cousin good-humouredly; but neither to her nor to Mrs. Ross did he confess that his night had been sleepless too. When he had finished his breakfast he went round to the stables, where Dr. Ross joined him. He had ordered the dog-cart to be got ready for him, and he told the groom that there was no need to bring it round to the front door.

Dr. Ross watched him silently as he drew on his driving gloves and turned up the collar of his coat.

'You will have a cold drive, I am afraid,' he said at last, as Michael took the reins and the brown mare began to fidget; 'come to my study the moment you get back.' And Michael nodded.

Much as he disliked the business before him,

he was anxious to get it over ; so he drove as fast as possible ; and as the mare was fresh and skittish, she gave him plenty to think about, and he was quite warm with the exertion of holding her in and restraining her playful antics by the time he pulled up at the village inn, which went by the name of the Cat and Fiddle. Here he had the mare put up, while he walked down the one main street of Brail, and down a lane or two, until he came to Mr. O'Brien's sequestered cottage.

Mr. O'Brien opened the door himself. When he saw Michael, he shook his head with an air of profound sadness, and led the way without speaking into the parlour, where he usually sat, and where Sam was basking before the fire after the luxurious habit of cats.

He got up, however, and rubbed his sleek head against Michael's knee as he sat down in the black elbow-chair ; but Mr. O'Brien still stood on the rug, shaking his head sadly.

‘ You have come, Captain. I made up my mind you would come to-day, to get at the rights of it ; I told Mat so. “ Depend upon it, the Captain will look us up,” I said to him ; “ he is a man of action, and it is not likely he will let the grass grow under his feet. He will be

round, sure enough, and you will have to be ready with your answers.”’

‘Where is your brother, Mr. O’Brien?’

‘He has gone out for a bit, but he will be back presently. I told him not to go far. “You’ll be wanted, you may take my word for it—you’ll be wanted, Mat,” I told him; and then he promised he would be round directly.’

‘I am afraid this affair has been a great shock to you, Mr. O’Brien. Miss Ross once told me that you had no idea whom your brother married.’

‘Well, sir, I can’t say as much as that. Mat once told me that the name of the girl he was going to wed was Olive Carrick, and that she came of respectable people; but he did not tell me much more than that. And now I put it to you, Captain—how was I to know that any woman would falsify her husband’s name, and that she should be living close to my doors, as one might say?—for what is a matter of three miles? It gave me a sort of shiver—and I have not properly got rid of it yet—when I think of that dear young creature, whom Susan and me have always loved—that she should be entrapped through that woman’s falseness into an engagement with Mat’s son. It goes to my heart—it

does indeed, Captain—to see that dear, sweet lady dragged into a connection that will only disgrace her.’

‘ My cousin would think it no disgrace to be connected with you, Mr. O’Brien ;’ for he knew too well Audrey’s large-mindedness and absence of conventionality. ‘ She has always looked upon you as her friend.’

‘ Thank you, Captain ; that is very handsomely said, and I wish my Prissy could have heard it, for she has done nothing but cry since the news reached her. “ Rachel refusing to be comforted ” is nothing compared to Prissy when the mood is on her ; she literally waters all her meals with her tears. Yes, you mean it handsomely ; but I am an old man, Captain Burnett, and know the world a bit, and I have the sense to see that Thomas O’Brien—honest and painstaking as he may be—is no fit connection for Dr. Ross’s daughter. Why, to think she might be my niece and call me “ uncle ” !’ and here the old man’s face flushed as he spoke. ‘ It is not right ; it is not as it should be. She must give him up—she must indeed, Captain !’

‘ I am afraid Dr. Ross holds that opinion, Mr. O’Brien. You will understand that he means no disrespect to you ; but it is simply

intolerable to him that any daughter of his should marry Matthew O'Brien's son. You see, I am speaking very plainly.'

'Yes, sir ; and I am speaking just as plainly to you. In this sort of case it is no use beating about the bush. Mat has made his bed, and he must just lie on it ; and his children—Heaven help them, poor young things !—must just lie on theirs too. Dear, dear ! to think that when she was talking to me so pleasantly about Mollie and Kester, and—what is her lad's name ?—that neither she nor I had an idea that she was speaking to their uncle ! There, it beats me, Captain—it does indeed !' And there were tears in the old man's eyes.

'I am afraid there is heavy trouble in store for them all, and for my cousin, too ; she will be very unwilling to give up Blake.'

'Humph ! that is what he calls himself ! Well, she was always faithful, Captain ; she is made of good stout stuff, and that sort wears best in the long-run. If she is a bit difficult, send her to me, and I'll talk to her. I will put things before her in a light she won't be able to resist.'

In spite of the sadness of the conversation, Michael could hardly forbear a smile.

‘I hardly know {what you would say to her, Mr. O’Brien.’

‘You leave that to me, Captain ; it is best not to be too knowing about things. But I don’t mind telling you one thing that I would say : “ My dear young lady, you have been a good and true friend to Thomas O’Brien, and I am grateful and proud to call you my friend ; but I will not have you for my niece. Mat’s son may be good as gold — I have nothing to say against the poor lad, who, after all, is my own flesh and blood ; but it would be a sin and shame to wed him, when his father picked oakum in a felon’s cell.” Don’t you think that will fetch her, sir ? Women are mostly proud, and like their men-kind to have clean hands ; and I’ll say it, too !’ And here Mr. O’Brien thumped the arm of his chair so emphatically, that Sam woke and uttered a reproachful mew.

‘I hope you will not be put to the pain of saying this to her,’ returned Michael, in a low voice.

What a fine old fellow this was ! He wondered what Dr. Ross would say when he repeated this speech to him. Nature must have intended Tom O’Brien for a gentleman.

Could anything be more touching than the way he sought to shield his girl-friend, even putting aside the natural claims of his own flesh and blood to prevent her from being sullied by any contact with him and his?

Michael felt as though he longed to shake hands with him, and tell him how he honoured and respected him; but he instinctively felt that any such testimony would hardly be understood. One word he did venture to say:

'I think it is very good of you to take our side.'

'Nay, sir, I can see nought of goodness in it. As my Susan used to say, you should not praise people for walking along a straight road, and for not taking the first crooked path that offers itself. Susan and I thought alike there—we were neither of us fond of crooked turnings. "There can only be one right and one wrong, Tom," as she would say; and I hope, Captain, that I shall always tell the truth and shame the devil as long as I am a living man.'

'I should think there would be no doubt of that,' returned Michael heartily. And then a faint smile crossed the old man's face; but it faded in a moment, as footsteps sounded in the passage outside.

‘That is Mat; he has kept his word in coming back so soon. I had better fetch him in, and then you’ll get it over.’

‘You need not leave the room, Mr. O’Brien; this is your business as well as ours.’

‘I know it, sir. But, thank you kindly, I feel as if I had said my say, and that I may as well bide quiet with Prissy. Mat has had it all out with me; we were up half the night talking. I always hoped I was a Christian, Captain; but I doubt it when I think of the words I spoke about that woman. She married that poor lad to serve her own purposes and to spite her lover; and while he doted on her, she just looked down on him, and scouted his people because they were in trade. She pretty nearly ruined him with her fine lady-like ways, and with pestering him for money that he had not got; and then, when he made that slip of his, and was almost crazy with the sin and the shame, she just gives him up—will have nothing more to do with him. And that is the woman that the Almighty made so fair outside that our poor foolish lad went half wild for the love of her! No, sir; if you will excuse me, I will just send Mat along, and keep in the background a bit. It makes me grind my teeth with pain

and anger to hear how she treated the poor fellow, almost driving him mad with her bitter tongue !

‘Then in that case I will certainly not keep you.’ And as he spoke he noticed how the vigorous old man seemed to totter as he rose from his chair ; but he only shook his head with the same gentle smile as Michael offered him his arm.

‘Nay, Captain ; that is not needed. I am only a bit shaken with all that’s passed, and you must give me time to right myself. Now I will send Mat in ; and when you have finished I’ll see you again.’

Michael did not have to wait long. He had only crossed the room to look at a photograph of Susan O’Brien which always stood on a little round table in the corner, when he found the light suddenly intercepted, as Matthew O’Brien’s tall figure blocked up the little window.

To his surprise, Mat commenced the conversation quite easily :

‘You are looking at Susan, Captain Burnett ? That was taken twelve or thirteen years ago. Isn’t it a kind, true face ?—that is better than a handsome one in the long-run. She does not

look as though she would desert a man when his head is under water—eh, Captain?’

‘No, indeed!’ returned Michael, falling at once into the other man’s humour. ‘Mrs. O’Brien must have been a thoroughly good woman, for her husband never seems to have got over her loss; he is always talking about her.’

‘That is so like Tom! He was never given to keep a silent tongue in his head: he must always speak out his thoughts, good or bad. That is rather different to me. Why, I have often spent days without opening my mouth, except to call to my dog. I think Tom finds it a relief to talk; the sound of his own tongue soothes him.’

‘Very likely. Shall we sit down, Mr. O’Brien? the fireside is rather a pleasant place this bitter March day.’

‘As you like,’ returned Mat indifferently; ‘for myself, I prefer to stand;’ and as he spoke he propped his tall figure against the wooden mantelpiece, and, half shielding his face with one arm, looked down into the blaze.

In this attitude Michael could only see his side-face, and he was startled at the strong likeness to Cyril—the profile was nearly as finely

cut; and it was only when he turned his full face that the resemblance ceased to be so striking. Cyril had the same dark eyes and low, broad forehead; but his beautifully-formed mouth and chin were very different to his father's, which expressed far too clearly a weak, irresolute character. But he was a handsome man, and, in spite of his shabby coat, there was something almost distinguished in his appearance. Anyone seeing the man for the first time would have guessed he had a story; very probably, looking at his broad chest and closely-cropped gray hair and black moustache, they would have taken him for a soldier, as Michael did.

Somehow, he found it a little difficult to begin the conversation; he hoped Matthew O'Brien would speak again; but he seemed disinclined to break the silence that had grown up between them.

'You are not much like your brother, Mr. O'Brien.'

'No, sir; Tom and I are not much alike, and more's the pity. Tom has been an honest man all his life.'

Michael was about to reply that that was not saying much in his favour; but he felt that

under the circumstances this would be awkward, so he held his peace.

‘There aren’t many men to beat Tom,’ continued Mat. ‘Few folk would be so stanch to their own flesh and blood when only disgrace would come of it ; but Tom is too fine-hearted to trample on a fellow when he is down and other folk are crying “Fie ! for shame !” on him. Would you believe it, sir,’ stretching out a sinewy thin hand as he spoke, ‘that that brother of mine never said an unkind word to me in my life ; and when I came back to him that night, feeling none too sure of my welcome, it was just a grip of the hand and “Come in, my lad,” as though I were the young chap I used to be coming home to spend my holiday with him and Susan.’

‘I think your brother one of the best men living, Mr. O’Brien.’

‘And so he is, sir ; and so he is ; but you have not come all this way to talk about Tom ;’ and here he paused, and again the shielding hand went over his eyes, and Michael could see a twitching of the mouth under the moustache. ‘It is about Olive that you want to see me.’

‘You are right. Will you kindly give me the date and place of your marriage ?’

Matthew O'Brien nodded and drew a folded paper from his breast-pocket.

'There it is. Tom told me I had better write it down in black and white to save us all trouble. I have put down the date and the name of the church where we were married. Strange to say, I can even recollect the name of the parson who did the job ; he was a little black-haired man, and his name was Craven. It was a runaway match, you know. Olive was stopping with some friends in Dublin, and I met her early one morning and took her to St. Patrick's. You will find it all right in the register—Matthew Robert O'Brien and Olive Carrick. There were only two witnesses : an old pew-opener, and a friend of mine, Edgar Boyle. Boyle is dead now, poor chap ! but you will find his name all right.'

'Can you tell me also, Mr. O'Brien, where I can find the entries of your children's baptism ? It may be necessary for them to know this some day.'

'Well, sir, I believe I can satisfy you on that point, too. We were living at Stoke Newington when the children were born. You will find their names in the register at St. Philip's—Cyril Langton Carrick : that was a bit of her

pride ; she wanted the boy to have her family names. Kester and Mary Olivia—my little Mollie as we meant to call her—I have not seen her since she was a baby ;’ and here Michael was sure Mat dashed away a tear. ‘It was a barbarous thing to rob me of my children, and I was so fond of the little chaps, too. I think I took most to Kester : he was such a cunning, clever little rogue, and his mother did not make half the fuss about him that she did about Cyril.’

‘She has acknowledged that to me.’

‘I don’t doubt it, sir. Olive will acknowledge anything ; she will have her flare-up one minute and frighten you to death with her tantrums, and the next she will be as placid and sweet-tongued as ever. She was never the same for two days running ; it would be always some scheme or other, something for which she needed money. I used to tell her she never opened her lips to me except to ask me for money ; and woe betide me if I told her I was hard up.’

‘But she had money of her own ?’

‘Yes ; but she muddled it away. She was always a bad manager. I never saw such a woman ; and Biddy was just as bad. We might

have had a comfortable home, and I might have kept out of trouble, if she had listened to me ; but I might as well have spoken to that wall.'

'But surely it was your duty as her husband to restrain her? Her son manages her quite easily now.'

'Perhaps so,' a little sullenly ; 'maybe she cares for her son, though she turned against her husband ; her heart was always like flint stone to me. I was afraid of her, Captain Burnett, and she knew it ; and that gave her a handle over me. A man ought not to fear his own wife—it is against nature ; but, there, when she looked at me in her cold, contemptuous way, and dared me to dictate to her, I felt all my courage ooze out of me. I could have struck her when she looked at me like that ; and I think she wanted me to, just to make out a case against me : but, fool that I was, I was too fond of her and the children to do it. I bore it all, and perilled my good name for her sake ; and this is how she has treated me—spurned me away from her as though I were a dog !'

'She has not been a good wife to you ; but, all the same, I do not understand why you took her at her word. Did you never in all these

years make an effort to be reconciled with her for the sake of your children ?’

‘ You do not know Olive when you put such a question. There will be no reconciliation possible in this world. I may compel her to own herself my wife, but I could not force her to say a kind word to me. She talked me over into setting her free, and made me promise not to hunt her out. She got over me. Olive is a rare talker ; she told me it would be better for the little chaps not to bear their father’s name—she would take them away and bring them up to be good, honest men, and she would take care no shame should ever touch them ; and would you believe it, sir, I was so cowed and broken with the thought of all those years I was to spend in prison, that for the time I agreed with her. It was just as though I had made her a promise to commit suicide. I was to let her and the children go, and not to put in my claims when they set me free ; and as she talked and I answered her, it seemed to me as though Mat O’Brien were already dead.’



CHAPTER II.

‘HOW CAN I BEAR IT?’

‘Through that gloom he will see but a shadow appearing,
Perceive but a voice as I come to his side ;
But deeper their voice grows, and nobler their bearing,
Whose youth in the fires of anguish hath died.’

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

MICHAEL was trying to frame a suitable reply to this speech, that was at once so tragic and hopeless, when Mat suddenly turned to him and said, in a strangely altered voice :

‘I want you to tell me one thing, sir. Why does she call herself Blake?’

‘I am afraid I cannot enlighten you on that point,’ returned Michael, after a moment’s consideration ; ‘probably it was the first name that occurred to her. You will allow that it is short and handy, and that it is by no means conspicuous.’ But this answer did not seem to

satisfy Matthew O'Brien. An uneasy, almost suspicious look came into his eyes.

'I suppose it does not mean,' he continued, hesitating over his words, 'that she—Olive—has put herself under another man's protection?'

'Good heavens, O'Brien!' exclaimed Michael, in a shocked voice. 'How can you wrong your wife so? With all her sins, I do not believe she is that sort of woman.'

'You mistake me, sir,' returned Mat doggedly. 'And, in a way, you mistake Olive too. She has not got the notions of other women. She would not think things wrong that would horrify other folk. When she gave me up, she said that she should consider herself free, and she might even make it straight with her conscience to marry another man, who would be a better protector to her and the children. I do not say Olive has done this. But if it be so, by the powers above, Captain Burnett, I will have the law of her there! So let her and the other fellow look out for themselves!'

'There is no need to excite yourself so, O'Brien. Your wife is too much a woman of the world to get herself into that sort of trouble. Her love for her eldest son is her master

passion. And I do not suppose she has even given a thought to another man.'

'I am glad to hear it, Captain. But Olive has fooled me once, and I doubted but she might have done it again. Perhaps you may not have heard it, but she would never have married me if Darrell—Major Darrell, he was—had not jilted her. She told me once, to spite me, that she worshipped the ground the fellow trod on. And he was a cad—confound him!—one of those light-hearted gentry who dance with girls and make love to them, and then boast of their conquests. But he had a way with him, and she never cared for anyone again. She has told me so again and again in her tantrums.'

'My poor fellow,' returned Michael pityingly, 'you may at least be easy on one point. Mrs. Blake—or Mrs. O'Brien, as I suppose we must call her—has certainly led an exemplary life since she left you, devoting herself to her children, and especially to her eldest son.'

Mat made no answer. His brief excitement had faded, and he now resumed his old dejection of manner. He leant his head on his hand again and looked into the fire; but by-and-by he roused himself from his abstraction.

‘Cyril has grown up a fine, handsome fellow, I hear. I suppose he has Olive’s good looks?’

‘He is very like her, certainly. He is a good-looking man, and exceedingly clever. Any father might feel proud of such a son.’

‘And he is to marry the young lady I saw here the other day. I forget her name, but she is the daughter of the chief boss down here.’

Michael gave a faint shudder.

‘Her name is Miss Ross.’

‘Oh yes, I remember now. Tom says the marriage will be broken off; but we will talk of that presently. I want to hear something about the other little chap—Kester.’

‘He has not got his brother’s good health, I am sorry to say.’ And here Michael gave a short sketch of Kester’s boyish accident, and the results that followed. ‘He can walk very fairly now,’ he continued, ‘and will soon lay aside his crutch; but I fear he will never make a strong man.’

‘Dear, dear!’ returned Mat in a sorrowful tone. ‘And to think of the active little monkey he used to be! Why, I can see him now, mounted aloft on my shoulder and holding me round the neck till I was fairly choked, and the other lad clasping me round the knee, and

halloing out that he wanted to ride dada, too, though Olive never seemed to care to see me play with them—we made so much noise, she said. Dear, dear! and to think of the poor chap on crutches! And there is Mollie, too; she was only a baby when I saw her last—such a fat, rosy little thing!

‘Mollie is a fine-grown girl, and as nice a child as you would wish to see. We are all very fond of her.’

‘Well, she has kept her word, and done her duty to them. And now look here, sir. You just bring me somewhere where I can see the youngsters, and hear them talk, and I will promise you to keep dark, and not let out to them that I am their father. I will just have a look at them, and then I will never trouble them again.’

‘What on earth do you mean, O’Brien?’

‘I mean that Olive is right, and that they are better without me,’ returned Mat dejectedly. ‘Do you suppose they would have any love in their hearts for a father who could only bring disgrace on them? No, sir; I am not going to stand in their light and spoil their lives for them. I have given them up to Olive, and she seems to have done her best for them. Let the

youngster have his sweetheart, and I will just bide here quietly with Tom ; or, if you think that Brail is too near, I will put the seas between us again ; and you can tell Olive so, if you like.'

' I shall tell her nothing of the kind, O'Brien,' returned Michael, much touched at this generosity on the part of the poor prodigal. ' I will not deny that this is the very thing she suggested ; she even begged me to propose this to you, but I refused. Do you suppose that either I or my cousin, Dr. Ross, would connive at such deceit and falsehood ? It is quite true that Mrs. Blake and her children may refuse to have anything to do with you, but that is solely their affair. In a few hours, Mr. O'Brien, your eldest son will be made aware of his father's existence.'

' I am sorry to hear it, sir,' returned Mat, in a weak, hopeless voice. ' You will make a great mistake, and nothing good will come of it. She will teach the youngsters to loathe my very name, and as for the lad '—here he spoke with strong emotion—' he will be ready to curse me for spoiling his life. No, no, sir ; let sleeping dogs lie. Better let me keep dark, and bring trouble to no one.'

But Michael shook his head. Such double-

dealing and deceit could only deepen the mischief.

‘ Dr. Ross will never give his sanction to his daughter’s marriage ; he has assured me so most solemnly. Whatever trouble comes will be of your wife’s causing.’

But Mat would not agree to this.

‘ She meant no harm, sir. Olive always had curious ideas of right and wrong, and she did her best for the youngsters. According to your account, she has brought them up well, and sent the lad to Oxford. Fancy a son of mine being such a swell, and engaged to that young lady, too ! Lord ! when I think of it, I am ready to wish I had never left the bush.’

‘ It is no use wishing that now, Mr. O’Brien.’

‘ No, sir ; and it is no use talking over what can’t be mended. If you have made up your mind to tell the lad, it is pretty plain that I can’t hinder you ; but I will not lift a finger to help you. I will just stop where I am.’

‘ I think perhaps that will be best under the circumstances.’

‘ But, all the same, it makes me uncommon restless to feel that Olive and the youngsters are only three miles off, and I can’t get at them. Put yourself in my place, sir, and you would not

find it very pleasant. And there's Tom, too—with all his fine-hearted Christianity—vowing vengeance on Olive, and threatening to turn her away from the door if she ever dares to show her face here.'

'I do not think that she will ever molest you or your brother.'

'I am quite of your opinion, Captain. Olive will give me a pretty wide berth, unless it is her interest to see me ; and then all Tom's rough speeches wouldn't turn her from her purpose. For tenacity and getting her own way, I'd back her against any woman.'

'Well, as you say, there is nothing to be gained by talking,' returned Michael, rising from his chair ; but at this moment Mr. O'Brien entered.

'I hope I am not interrupting you, Captain ; but it is getting late, and I was thinking you would take a snack with us. The women are dishing up the dinner—just a baked shoulder of mutton and potatoes under it. We are plain folk, but Prissy and I will be glad and proud if you will join us, sir ;' and, after a moment's hesitation, Michael consented.

He had had no idea how late it was ; they would already be sitting down to luncheon at

Woodcote. It would be better for him to take some food before he set out on his cold drive home.

'If you will allow me to leave you directly afterwards,' he observed; and, as Mat left the room that moment, he took the opportunity to give Mr. O'Brien a brief *résumé* of the conversation.

'He begged me to keep it all dark,' he finished; 'he is thinking more of his children than himself. But I told him that such a course would be impossible.'

'And you spoke the truth, sir; and no good would come of such crookedness. But Mat meant well; the lad has a good heart, and I do not doubt he has a sore conscience when he thinks of all the evil he has wrought. Leave him with me, sir; I can manage him best. There, I hear Prissy calling to us, and we will just take our places.'

Michael felt faint and weary, and the homely viands seemed very palatable to him; but he noticed how Matthew O'Brien's want of appetite seemed to distress his brother.

'You are eating nought, lad,' he kept saying at intervals, and once he bade Prissy fetch the remains of a meat pie that Mat had enjoyed the

previous days ; ‘ maybe he will find it more toothsome,’ he said in his hearty way ; but Mat would have nothing to say to it.

‘ You let me be, Tom,’ he said at last ; ‘ a man has not always got stomach for his food. The Captain has taken away my appetite with his talk, and the sight of the meat makes me sick ;’ and then he got up from the table, and they saw him pacing up and down the garden with his pipe.

Michael got away as soon as possible, and Mr. O’Brien walked with him to the inn. When the dogcart was brought out, he shook his hand very heartily.

‘ Let me know how things go on, Captain, and God bless you !’ and then, as though by an afterthought : ‘ If the girl gives you trouble, send her to me, and I will just talk the sense into her.’ And then he stood in the road and watched until the dogcart and driver were out of sight.

Afternoon work had begun as Michael entered Woodcote, but he found Dr. Ross alone in the study.

‘ I have only a few minutes to give you, Michael,’ he said, looking up from the letter he was writing ; ‘ I expected you back at least two

hours ago.' Then Michael gave him a concise account of his interview with the brothers.

'Thomas O'Brien is a grand old fellow,' he said enthusiastically; 'you should have heard him talk, Dr. Ross; and as for poor Mat, he has the makings of a good fellow about him, too, only the devil somehow spoilt the batch. Would you believe it?—the poor beggar wanted to efface himself—to clear out altogether for the sake of the youngsters, as he called them. He was not very polished in his language, but what can you expect? Still, he meant well.'

'I dare say he did,' returned the Doctor with a sigh; 'you had better keep that paper to show Cyril. I must send you away now, as Carter and the other boys are coming to me. I will see you later on.'

And then Michael took himself off. He could hear Audrey's voice as he passed the door of her sitting-room; Mollie was with her. A few minutes later, as he stood at his window wondering what he should do with himself, he saw her walk down the terrace towards the gate with Mollie hanging on her arm; they seemed laughing and talking. 'How long will she wear that bright face?' he said to himself as he threw himself into his easy-chair and took up the paper.

He had just fallen into a doze, with Booty stretched on the softest of rugs at his feet, when there was a light tap at his door, and to his surprise and discomposure Cyril Blake entered the room.

The visit was so wholly unexpected that Michael stared at him for a moment without speaking. Cyril had never come to his private sitting-room before without a special invitation.

‘I must apologize for this intrusion, Captain Burnett,’ began Cyril quickly; ‘but I wanted to speak to you particularly. Were you asleep? I am so sorry if I have disturbed you.’

‘No, nonsense. I only felt drowsy because I have been out in this cold wind and the room is so warm. Take a chair, Blake. I shall be wide awake in a moment. Have you seen the paper to-day? There is nothing in it, only a remarkably stupid article on Bismarck.’

‘I will look at it by-and-by; but to tell you the truth, I have come to speak to you about my mother. I am seriously uneasy about her: either she is ill, or there is something grievously wrong. I understood from Mollie that you were with her for more than an hour yesterday; in fact, that she sent for you.’

The fire had burnt hollow during Michael’s

brief nap, and he seized this opportunity to stir it vigorously into a blaze; it afforded him a momentary respite. A few seconds' reflection convinced him, however, that it was no use beating about the bush with a man of Cyril's calibre. The truth had to be told, and no amount of preparation would render it palatable.

'You are right,' he returned quietly; 'Mrs. Blake sent for me. She thought that I should be able to help her in a difficulty.'

Cyril looked intensely surprised. 'I thought Mollie must have made a mistake. It seems very strange that my mother——'

He stopped, as though civility did not permit him to finish his sentence. But Michael perfectly understood him.

'It seems strange to you; of course it does. My acquaintance with Mrs. Blake is so slight that it certainly gives me no right to her confidence; but she was in trouble—in great trouble, I may say—and chance threw me in her way, and so——'

But here Cyril interrupted him.

'My mother in trouble!' he returned incredulously, but Michael thought he looked a little pale; 'excuse me, Captain Burnett, if I seem

rude, but from a boy I have been my mother's friend. She has never kept anything from me. I find it almost impossible to believe that she would give that confidence to a comparative stranger, which she would refuse to her son. May I beg you to speak plainly? I abhor mysteries.'

Cyril spoke impatiently and curtly; his tone was almost displeased. But Michael took no offence; he regarded the young man very kindly.

'I abhor them too,' he replied gravely; 'but I want you to understand one thing: it was a mere chance that brought me in Mrs. Blake's way at a moment when she needed assistance; I was only like any other stranger who sees a lady in difficulty. Now I have told you this I can speak more plainly.'

'I wish to heavens you would!' returned Cyril, with growing excitement. 'Do you know the impression you are giving me?—that there is some mysterious confidence between you and my mother. Is it too much to ask if I may know what this difficulty and trouble mean?'

'No, Blake; you shall know all in good time,' replied Michael, with disarming gentleness.

'If I do not speak out at once, it is because I fear to give you too great a shock.'

'Too great a shock?'

'Yes. Your mother, out of mistaken kindness, has kept her children in ignorance all these years that they have a father living. He was not a father of whom they could be proud, and she tried to keep the fact of his existence from them.'

'Wait a moment!' exclaimed Cyril. The poor fellow had turned very white. 'I must take this in. What are you telling me, Burnett? That my mother—my widowed mother—has a husband living?'

'I am telling you the truth. Are you ready to hear me say more? I will wait any time you like; but it is a long story, and a sad one. Your mother has left me to tell it.'

'Go on! Let me hear every word! Hide nothing—nothing!'

Cyril spoke in a dull, stifled voice, as though he felt choking. When Michael began to speak, very slowly and quietly, he almost turned his back to him; and as the story proceeded, Michael noticed how he clutched the carved arms of his chair; but he did not once see his face. Michael afterwards owned that telling that

miserable story to Olive O'Brien's son was one of the toughest jobs he had ever done in his life. But he had no idea how well he did it : there was not an unnecessary word. With the utmost care he strove to shield the woman, and to show her conduct in the best light. 'It was for her children's sake she did it,' he said again and again ; but there was no answering word from Cyril ; if he had been turned to stone, his position could not have been more rigid.

'Have you understood me, Blake? My poor, dear fellow, if you knew how sorry Dr. Ross and I are for you——'

Then, as Michael mentioned Dr. Ross's name, Cyril seemed galvanized into sudden life.

'He knows! he knows! For God's sake give me air!' But before Michael could cross the room, Cyril had stumbled to the window and flung it up, and stood there, with the bitter east wind blowing on his face, as though it were a refreshing summer breeze.

The chill air made Michael shiver ; but he knew by experience how intolerable was that sense of suffocation, and he stood by patiently until that deadly feeling had passed.

'Are you better now, Blake? My poor fellow, can you sit down and speak to me?'

Then Cyril turned his face towards him, and Michael was shocked to see how strained and haggard it looked.

‘Does she know, too?’

‘Not yet ; her father will tell her.’

Then the poor boy shuddered from head to foot.

‘They will make her give me up! O my God! how can I bear it? Burnett, I think I shall go mad! Tell me it is not true—that my mother has not lied to me all these years!’

‘At least, she has lied for her son’s sake.’ But he knew how futile were his words, as he saw the bitter contempt in Cyril’s honest eyes.

‘I will never forgive her! She has ruined my life! she has made me wish that I were dead! I will never, never——’

But Michael interrupted him somewhat sternly :

‘Hush! hush! You do not know what you are saying. She is your mother, Blake—nothing can alter that fact.’

‘She has deceived us all! No, I will not speak ; nothing can make it better or worse. If I lose Audrey, I do not care what becomes of me!’

Michael looked at him pityingly.

‘Do you think you ought to marry her, Blake?’

Then Cyril flung away from him with a groan; even in his misery he understood that appeal to his generosity. But he put it from him: he was too much stunned, too dazed altogether, to follow out any train of reasoning. In a vague sort of way he understood two facts: that he and Kester and Mollie were disgraced, and that his mother—the mother whom he adored—had deceived him. Beyond this he could not go. The human mind has limits.

Afterwards, in the chill hour of darkness and solitude, Michael’s words would come back to him: ‘Do you think you ought to marry her, Blake? Do you think you ought to marry her?’





CHAPTER III.

‘I SHALL NEVER BE FREE.’

‘But there are true hearts which the sight
Of sorrow summons forth ;
Though known in days of past delight,
We know not half their worth.’

BAYLY.

THE words escaped from Michael almost unconsciously ; he hardly knew that he spoke them aloud ; but in his inner consciousness he had no doubt at all of the course that ought to be pursued. If he had been in Cyril’s place he would not have hesitated for a moment. Dearly as he loved Audrey—and what that love was only he himself knew—he would have refused marry her. He would have separated himself from her utterly, and at once.

Michael’s strong, long-suffering nature would have carried him nobly through such an ordeal.

He was a man who would have acted up to the spirit of the Gospel command 'to pluck out the offending eye, or to cut off the right hand;' there would have been no parleying, no weak dalliance with temptation.

'I love you, but it is my duty to leave you, so farewell for ever!'—that is what he would have said to her, knowing all the time that life would be utterly joyless to him. Would Cyril, in his hot, untried youth, be capable of a like generosity, or would he cleave to his betrothed with passionate, one-sided fealty, vowing that nothing on earth should separate them as long as they two loved each other?

'They will make me give her up!'—that was all he had said. That seemed to be the one deadly terror that assailed him.

Cyril had turned away with a groan when Michael spoke, but he made no audible answer, and the next moment his hand was on the door.

'Where are you going, Blake?' inquired Michael anxiously.

It was impossible to keep him, and yet, how could he let him leave him in such a condition?

'I must get away from here!' returned Cyril hoarsely. 'I must be alone somewhere.'

And Michael understood him.

‘Let me at least walk with you,’ he returned quickly. ‘You might meet someone, and perhaps I may be of use. Do not refuse; I will not speak to you.’ And, as Cyril made no objection—indeed, it was doubtful whether he even heard what Michael said—he followed him downstairs.

Just as they reached the hall the drawing-room door opened, and, before he could warn Cyril, Audrey came out. She had some music in her hand. She uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure when she saw them.

‘Michael, I thought you were lost. What have you been doing with yourself all day? Were you going out with Cyril? Please don’t go just yet; it is just beginning to rain, and I want him to practise this duet with me. Will you?’ looking up in Cyril’s face with one of her bright smiles.

‘I cannot; another time. Please do not keep me!’

Cyril hardly knew what he said. He pushed by her as she stood there smiling, with the music in her hand, and went out bareheaded into the rain and darkness.

Audrey looked bewildered.

‘What does he mean? Is he ill? has any-

thing happened ? He is so white, and he has forgotten his hat ! He has never left me like this before. Oh, Michael, do call him back ; I must speak to him !

‘ I cannot. I think something is troubling him. Let me go, Audrey ; he will tell you everything by-and-by.’ And Michael snatched up his hat and Cyril’s, and hurried after him as fast as his halting gait permitted.

Cyril had not gone far ; he was standing by the gate quite motionless, and his hair and face were wet with the heavy rain. Michael took him by the arm and walked on with him ; he must see him safely to his room, and charge Mrs. Blake not to go near him.

‘ He must have time ; he is simply stunned and incapable of thought now,’ he said to himself, as he piloted him through the dark, wet streets.

Biddy admitted them. She gave them a searching glance as they entered. Cyril’s disordered condition must have told her everything, for she put her wrinkled, claw-like hand on his arm with a warning gesture.

‘ Don’t let the mistress see you like that, Mr. Cyril avick, or you’ll fright her to death. Go up softly, or she will hear you.’

But Biddy's warning was in vain. The staircase was badly lighted, and Michael made a false, stumbling step. The next moment Mrs. Blake came out on the landing. The sight of the two men together seemed to transfix her with horror.

'You have told him!—oh, heavens! you have told him!' she cried, in a despairing voice.

Cyril raised his heavy eyes and looked at her, but he did not speak; he passed her as he had passed Audrey, and went up to his room, and they heard the door close heavily behind him.

'I will go to him! How dare you detain me, Captain Burnett? I will go to my son!'

But Michael took no notice of this angry remonstrance; his hand was on her arm, and very gently, but firmly, he made her enter the drawing-room.

'Mrs. Blake, will you listen to me for a moment?'

'No, I will not listen!' she answered passionately, and her bosom began to heave. 'I will go to him and make him speak to me. Did you see how he looked at me—his mother—as he has never looked at me in his life?' And the unhappy woman broke into tears and sobs. 'Oh, my boy! my boy! Let me go to

him, Captain Burnett, and I will bless you as long as I live ; let me go and kneel to him, if I must. Do you think my boy will see his mother at his feet and not forgive her ?’

‘He will forgive you, Mrs. Blake,’ returned Michael, in a pitying voice ; ‘but you must give him time. He cannot speak to you now—he can speak to no one ; he is simply stunned. Give me your promise that you will not see him to-night.’

‘Impossible ! I will make no such promise. He is my son, not yours. If he cannot speak to me, I can at least take his hand and tell him that I am sorry.’

‘He will not be able to hear you. As far as I can tell, he has taken nothing in ; the news has simply crushed him. If you will give him time, he will pull himself together ; but I would not answer for the consequences if you persist in seeing him to-night. He is not himself. There would be words said that ought never to be uttered. Mrs. Blake, do be persuaded. I am speaking for your sake as well as his.’

‘You are always so hard,’ she moaned.

But from her manner he thought she would not disobey him ; he had managed to frighten her.

‘You will be wise if you take my advice,’ he returned, moving away from the door. ‘I am going to him now, but I shall not stay; it is, above all things, necessary that he should be alone.’

‘Will you speak to him for me? Will you tell him that my heart is nearly broken with that cold, reproachful look of his? Will you at least say this, Captain Burnett?’

‘I think it would be better not to mention your name to him to-night.’

Then she threw herself back on the couch in an hysterical outburst.

Michael thought it useless to stay with her. He found Biddy outside as usual, and sent her in to do her best for her mistress; and then he went up to Cyril’s room. He found him sitting on the edge of his bed; the window was wide open, and the rain was driving in, and had already wetted the carpet; a candle someone had lighted was guttering in the draught. Michael closed the window, and then he looked at the fireplace. There was plenty of fuel at hand. Cyril often worked in his own room, and now and then his mother’s care had provided him with a fire. The room felt cold and damp. There were matches at hand, and Michael had

no scruple in lighting a fire now ; the crackle of wood seemed to rouse Cyril.

‘Why do you do that ? there is no need,’ he said irritably.

‘Pardon me, there is every need. Do you know your coat is wet, Blake ? You must change it at once.’

But Cyril only gave an impatient shrug.

‘Will you let me see you change it before I go ?’ he persisted, and he actually had his way, perhaps because Cyril was anxious to get rid of him. ‘Now I am going ; I only want to say one word, Blake : you will be safe to-night, your mother will not come near you.’ Then a look of relief crossed Cyril’s wan face. ‘You shall, at least, have peace for a few hours. If I can help you in any way, you have only to speak. Will you remember that ?’

‘Thank you.’

‘I mean it. There, that is all I have got to say. God bless you !’ and as he grasped Cyril’s hand there was a faint response.

Michael crept down as softly as he could. As he passed the drawing-room door he could hear Mrs. Blake’s hysterical sobs, and Biddy soothing her. ‘The Nemesis has come,’ he said to himself ; and then he went into the

lower room, where he found Mollie and Kester reading over the fire.

‘Don’t let me disturb you,’ he said hurriedly, as they both sprang up to greet him; ‘Mollie, your brother wishes to be quiet to-night. He has just heard something that troubles him a good deal, and he has desired that no one should go near him. If I were you, I should take no notice at all.’

‘But what are we to do about supper?’ returned Mollie with housewifely anxiety; ‘we have such a nice supper, and Cyril will be so cold and hungry shut up in his room. We have made such a big fire, because he was going to spend the evening with us.’

‘He has a fire, too; he was very wet, and the room felt damp, so I lighted it. You might take up a tray to him presently and put it outside his door, and perhaps a cup of nice hot coffee.’

‘Ah! I will go and make it at once, and mamma shall have some, too.’ And Mollie ran off in her usual impetuous manner, but Kester sat still in his place.

‘What is the matter, Captain Burnett?’ he asked anxiously; ‘we heard mother crying just now, and saying that Cyril would not speak to

her. Mollie heard it quite plainly, and so did I.'

'You shall know all in good time, my dear boy,' returned Michael, laying his hand on Kester's shoulder; 'do not ask me any more just now.'

Kester looked at him wistfully, but he was trained to self-discipline, and he asked no more; and Michael went back to Woodcote.

It was just dinner-time, and the gong sounded before he was ready; but he made some easy excuse and slipped into his place, and began to talk to Dr. Ross about the new swimming-baths that were being built. It was the first topic that came handy to him, and Dr. Ross at once followed his lead; the subject lasted them until the end of dinner. Audrey was unusually silent, but neither of them made any remark on her gravity. Now and then Michael addressed some observation to her, but she answered him briefly and without interest.

They went into the schoolroom for prayers as usual, and Audrey played the harmonium; but as he was following Mrs. Ross back into the drawing-room, Audrey tapped him on the arm.

'Don't go in there just yet, Michael; I want to speak to you.'

Then he suffered himself very reluctantly to be detained by the hall fire.

‘Michael,’ she began, in rather a peremptory tone; ‘I cannot understand either you or Cyril to-night. You are both very strange, I think. Cyril leaves me without a word, and goes out looking like a ghost, and you tell me that something is troubling him, and yet neither of you vouchsafe me one word of explanation.’

‘I cannot help it, Audrey; it is not my affair. Blake was in a hurry; you must have seen that for yourself.’

‘He was very extraordinary in his behaviour, and so were you. Of course, if you don’t choose to answer me, Michael, I will just send a note across to Cyril, and tell him I must see him at once.’

‘I should hardly do that, if I were you.’

‘Not write to him!’ in an offended voice. ‘Really, Michael, you are too mysterious; why, this borders on absurdity! Cyril is in trouble—in one breath you tell me that—and then you would prevent my writing to ask him to come to me! I shall certainly write to him.’

‘Will you go to your father instead? He has just gone into the study.’

Then Audrey looked at him with intense astonishment.

‘What has my father got to do with it?’

‘Never mind all that,’ returned Michael slowly. ‘Go to Dr. Ross, and ask him why Blake is in trouble. He will tell you; you may take my word for it.’

Audrey still gazed at him; but Michael’s grave manner left her in no doubt as to the seriousness of the matter, and her eyes looked a little troubled.

‘Go, dear,’ he repeated gently; ‘it will be best for you to hear it from him.’

Then she left him without another word, and went straight to the study.

It seemed as though her father expected her, for he looked at her as she came slowly towards him, and put out his hand.

‘You have come to talk to me, my darling. Sit down beside me. No, not that chair; it is too far off. Come closer to me, my child.’

Then, as Audrey obeyed him, she felt a sense of growing uneasiness. What did that sorrowful tenderness in her father’s voice mean? For the moment her courage failed her, and her lips could not frame the question she had come to ask.

'You want me to tell you about Cyril's trouble?'

Then she sat and gazed at him in speechless dread.

Dr. Ross cleared his throat and shifted his spectacles. He began to find his task difficult.

'If I only knew how to prepare you, Audrey! But I can think of no words that will break the force of such a shock. I will tell you one thing: a few hours ago Cyril was as ignorant of the great trouble that has befallen him as you are at this present moment.'

She touched him with a hand that had grown suddenly very cold.

'Wait for one minute, father; I must ask you something: Did Michael tell this thing to Cyril this afternoon?'

'Yes, dear. By some strange chance Michael was put in possession of a terrible secret. There was no one else to break it to the poor fellow; and, as you and I know, Mike is not the man to shirk any unpleasant duty.'

'I understand. You may go on now, father dear; I am prepared—I am quite prepared. I know it was no light trouble that brought that

look on Cyril's face; and Michael, too, was very strange and unlike himself.' And then she composed herself to listen.

Dr. Ross told the story as carefully as he could, but he made no attempt to soften facts. A skilful surgeon cuts deep: the patient may quiver under the relentless knife, but the present pain will prevent lasting injury. Dr. Ross wished his daughter to see things from his point of view. It was impossible to spare her suffering; but she was young, and he hoped time and her own strong sense of duty would bring their own healing. He could not judge of the effect on her. Almost at his first words she had dropped her head upon his knees, and her face was hidden from him; and though his hand rested on her soft hair, she made no sign or movement.

'That is all I have to tell you, my darling. No one knows but you and I and Michael. I have not told your mother; I thought it best to wait.' Then she stirred a little uneasily under his caressing hand. 'My own child, you do not need to be told how I grieve for you and Cyril; it is a bitter disappointment to you both; but—but'—his voice dropped a little—'you must give him up.'

There was no perceptible start ; only, as he said this, Audrey raised her face from his knee, and looked at him. She was very pale, but her eyes were quite dry ; only the firm, beautiful lips trembled a little.

‘I do not understand, father. Why must I give him up?’

‘Why?’ Dr. Ross could hardly believe his ears as he heard this. ‘My child,’ he said, with a touch of sternness, ‘it is very easy to understand. Cyril is not to blame—he is as innocent as you are ; but the son of Matthew O’Brien can never be my son-in-law.’

‘No,’ she returned slowly, ‘I suppose not. I ought not to be surprised to hear you say that.’

‘It is what any father would say, Audrey.’

‘Anyhow, it is for you to say it, if you think it right, and it is for me to obey you.’

Then he put his arm round her with an endearing word or two. She was his good, obedient child—his dearly-loved daughter, who had never grieved him in her life.

‘I trust I may never grieve you,’ she replied gently ; but there was a great solemnity in her eyes. ‘Father, if you tell me that I must not marry Cyril, I shall be compelled

to obey you ; but it will break my heart to think that your mind is fully made up on this point.'

' My darling, you are both very young, and in time——' He stopped, arrested by the strangeness of her look.

' You think that we shall get over it : that is your meaning, is it not ? But I am afraid you are wrong. Cyril loves me too well ; he would never get over it.'

' But, my dear——'

' Father, will you listen to me for a moment ? You need not fear that I should ever disobey you—you are my father, and that is enough. But I shall live in the hope that you will change your mind.'

' My child, I must forbid that hope. I cannot let you cheat yourself with any such false supposition. My mind will know no change in this matter.'

' Then, in that case, I shall never marry Cyril. If you cannot give me your blessing on my marriage, I will remain as I am—Audrey Ross. But, father, I shall never give him up ! Never—never !'

' If Cyril be the man I think him, he will give you up, Audrey ; he will be far too proud

and honourable to hold you to your engagement.'

'That may be,' she answered a little wearily. 'I know the strong pressure that will be put on him. You will have no difficulty with him; he will do as you wish. My poor Cyril! how can he do otherwise? But all the same, I shall be true to him as long as he and I live. I shall feel that I belong to him.'

'But, my darling, do be sensible. When the engagement is broken off you will be free, utterly free.'

But she shook her head.

'I shall never be free while Cyril lives. Father, you do not understand. He may set me free to-morrow, but I shall still consider myself bound. When he comes here, I shall tell him so, and I do not think he will misunderstand me.'

Dr. Ross sighed. Here was an unexpected difficulty. She would obey him, but she would regard herself as the victim of filial obedience. She would not marry her lover without his consent, but she would have nothing to say to any other man. She would consider herself fettered by this hopeless betrothal. He had declined to accept the son of Matthew O'Brien

as his son-in-law ; but would not his own death set her free to fulfil her engagement ? Dr. Ross groaned within himself as he thought of this. If only he could bring her to reason ; but at his first word of pleading her eyes filled with tears.

‘ Father, I can bear no more ; you have made me very unhappy. I have promised not to marry without your consent ; but no one on earth could make me give him up.’

Then he looked at her very sorrowfully, and said no more. If she had thrown herself into his arms he could almost have wept with her. Would she ever know how his heart bled for her ? But she only kissed him very quietly.

‘ You are not angry with me, father ?’

‘ Angry with you ? Oh, Audrey, my child, how can you ask such a question ?’

‘ That is well,’ she returned calmly. ‘ There must never be anything between us. I could not bear that.’ Then her breast heaved a little, and a large tear stole down her face. ‘ Will you tell mother and Michael what I have said—that I will never give him up ?’

And then she walked very slowly out of the room.

Half an hour later Michael came into the

study. He did not speak ; but the Doctor shook his head as he came silently towards him.

‘It is a bad business, Mike. That girl of mine will give us trouble. She is as good as gold, but she will give us trouble.’

‘She refuses to give him up?’

Michael sat down as he asked the question ; his strength seemed to have deserted him.

‘That is what she says—that she will regard herself as altogether bound to him. She is very firm. With all her goodness and sweetness, Audrey has a strong will.’

‘Do you mean that she will still marry him?’

‘Not unless I will give my consent. No, Mike ; she is a dutiful child. She will never give herself to any man without her parents’ blessing and approval ; but she will not marry anyone else.’

Then there was a curious fixed look on Michael’s face.

‘I am not surprised, Dr. Ross. Audrey is too generous to forsake any man when he is in trouble. She will not think of herself—she never does ; her whole heart will be set on the thought of giving him comfort. You must not try to change her resolution. It would be useless.’

‘The deuce take it all!’ returned the Doctor irritably. ‘For there will be no peace of mind for any of us, Mike.’ But Dr. Ross’s voice was hardly as clear as usual. ‘I suppose I must just go and have it all out with Emmie—there is nothing like getting an unpleasant job over; she and Geraldine can put their heads together, but they had better keep Harcourt away from me.’

And the Doctor stalked out of the room with an unwonted gloom on his genial face.

Michael did not follow him. He sat still for a few minutes looking at the Doctor’s empty chair.

‘I knew it; I could have said it. Audrey is just that sort of woman. She will never give him up—whether she loves him or not—as long as she feels he needs her. Poor Blake! poor fellow! Of the two, I hardly think he is the one to be pitied; but she will never find that out for herself. Never, never!’

And then Booty scratched and whined at the door, and he got up and let him in.



CHAPTER IV.

‘WHO WILL COMFORT HIM?’

‘Earth has nothing more tender than a woman’s heart, when it is the abode of piety.’—LUTHER.

DR. ROSS had deferred telling his wife for more than one reason : he dreaded the effect on her emotional nature, and, above all things, he hated a scene. But for once he was agreeably disappointed. Mrs. Ross received the news more quietly than he expected ; the very suddenness and force of the shock made her summon up all her womanly fortitude to bear such an overwhelming misfortune. Her first thought was for Audrey, and she would have gone to her at once ; but her husband gently detained her.

‘Give her time, Emmie ; she has only just left me, and she will not be ready even for her mother. Sit down again, my dear ; I cannot

spare you yet.' And Mrs. Ross very reluctantly took her seat again on the couch.

They talked a little more, and Mrs. Ross wept as she thought of that poor dear boy, as she called him ; for Cyril had grown very dear to her, and she had begun to look on him as her own son. But it seemed as though the whole vial of her wrath was to be emptied on the head of Mrs. Blake. At any other time, and in different circumstances, Dr. Ross would have been amused at the scathing invectives that were uttered by his sweet-tempered wife.

' But, my dear Emmie, you must consider her provocations. Think of a woman being tied to a feckless ne'er-do-well like Matthew O'Brien !'

' Don't talk to me, John ; I will not listen to you. Was she not his wedded wife, and the mother of his children ? Had she not vowed to be faithful to him for better and for worse ?'

' Yes, my dear ; but you must allow it was for worse.'

' That may be ; but she was bound to him all the same by her wifely duty. She might have saved him, but instead of that she has been his ruin. How dare any woman rob her husband of his own children, and forbid him to lay claim to them ? She is a false, perjured

wife!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross, with rising excitement.

'My dear, I am not defending her; but at least she is to be pitied now.'

'I do not think so. It is Cyril and Kester and Mollie who are to be pitied, for having such parents. My heart bleeds for them, but not for her. What will become of them all? How will that poor boy bear his life?'

'I do not know. But, Emmie, tell me one thing—you agree with me that Audrey must not marry him?'

'Of course she must not marry him! What would Geraldine and Percival say?'

Then the Doctor muttered 'Pshaw!'

'Why, his name is not Blake at all. How could a daughter of ours form a connection with the O'Briens? My poor Audrey! And now, John, you must let me go to her.' And this time Dr. Ross made no objection.

It was nearly midnight by this time, but Audrey had not thought of retiring to bed; she was sitting by her toilet-table, with her hands folded in her lap. Her mother's appearance seemed to surprise her.

'Dear mother, why have you come? There was no need—no need at all.'

Then, as her mother put her arms round her, she laid her head on her shoulder as though she were conscious of sudden weariness. Mrs. Ross's eyes were red with weeping, but Audrey's were still quite bright and dry.

‘Mother dear, you will be so tired!’

‘What does that matter? It is your father who is tired; he feels all this so terribly. My own darling, what am I to say to you in this awful trouble that has come upon you, but to beg you to be brave for all our sakes?’

‘Yes; and for his, too.’

‘If I could only bear it for you—that is what a mother feels when her child suffers—if I could only take it from you, and carry it as my own burden!’

Then the girl gently pressed her with her arms.

‘That is what I feel about him,’ she returned, and there was a pained look in her eyes as she spoke. ‘He is so young, and all this is so terrible; his pride will suffer, and his heart, and his mother will be no comfort to him. If he only had you!’ And then she did break down a little, but she soon recovered herself. ‘I have been sitting here trying to find out why this has been allowed to happen to him. I think

there is no one so good, except Michael. It is very dreadful !' And here she shuddered slightly. 'How will he live out his daily life and not grow bitter over it ? My poor, poor Cyril !'

'My darling, are you not thinking of yourself at all ?'

'Of myself ? No, mother. Why should I think of myself ? I have you and father and Michael—you will all comfort me ; but who will comfort him ?'

'His heavenly Father, Audrey.'

'Oh yes, you are right ; but do young men think as we do ? Cyril is good, but he never speaks of these things. He is not like Michael.'

'It was trouble that taught Michael.'

'Yes, I know ; but I would fain have spared my poor Cyril such a bitter lesson. Mother, I want you to tell them all not to talk to me—I mean Michael and Gage and Percival ; I could not bear it. As I told father, I shall never give him up. If he goes away, I must bid him good-bye ; but if he will write to me, I shall answer his letters.'

'I do not think your father would approve of that, Audrey. My child, consider—would it not be better, and more for Cyril's good, that you should give him up entirely ?'

‘No, mother; I do not think so. I believe in my heart that the knowledge that I am still true to him will be his only earthly comfort. No one knows him as I do; his nature is very intense. He is almost as intense as Michael, and that is saying a great deal.’

‘My love, will you let your mother say one thing to you?—that I think you are making a grievous mistake, and that your father thinks so too.’

‘I know it, mother, and it pains me to differ from you both in this; but you will never convince me. I plighted my troth to Cyril because I loved him dearly, and nothing will change that love. It is quite true,’ she continued dreamily, as though she were following out some train of habitual thought, ‘that I have often asked myself if I loved him in the same way in which other girls cared for their lovers—as Gage did for Percival, for example—if mine were not too quiet and matter-of-fact an attachment; and I have never been able to answer myself satisfactorily.’

‘Have you not, Audrey?’

‘No, mother dear; but of course this is in confidence: it must be sacred to you and me. I think I am different to most girls. I have

never wished to be married; and dear as Cyril is to me, the thought of my wedding-day has always oppressed me. I have made him unhappy sometimes, because he saw that I shrank from it.'

Mrs. Ross felt a quick sense of relief that almost amounted to joy. Was Audrey in love with him, after all? She had never heard a girl talk so strangely. What an unutterable blessing it would be to them all if she were not utterly crushed by her misfortune, and if any future healing would be possible; but she was careful not to express this to her daughter.

'My experience has been very different,' she answered quietly. 'My happiest moments were those in which your dear father spoke of our future home. I think I was quite as averse to a long engagement as he was.'

'I can believe it, mother dear, but our natures are not alike; but there is one thing on which we are agreed, that an engagement is almost as binding as marriage; that is,' correcting herself, 'as long as two persons love each other.'

'It ought not to be binding under such circumstances, Audrey.'

'Ought it not? Ah, there we differ! With all my want of enthusiasm, my absence of

sentimentality. I shall hold fast to Cyril. I have never yet regarded myself as his wife; I did not wish to so regard myself. But now I shall give myself up in thought wholly to him, and I pray God that this knowledge will give him comfort.'

Mrs. Ross was silent. She felt that she hardly understood her daughter; it was as though she had entered on higher ground, where the wrappings of some sacred mist enveloped her. This was not the language of earthly passion—this sublime womanly abnegation. It was not even the tender language of a Ruth, widowed in her affections, and cleaving with bounteous love and faith to the mother of her young Jewish husband, 'Whither thou goest I will go;' and yet the inward cry of her heart seemed to be like that of honest Tom O'Brien: 'The Lord do so unto me, and more also, if ought but death part me and thee.'

The one thought wholly possessed her that she might give him comfort.

'My poor, dear child, if I could only make you feel differently!'

Then Audrey laid her hand gently on her mother's lips. It was an old habit of hers

when she was a child, and too much argument had proved wearisome. :

'Hush! do not let us talk any more. I am so tired, so tired, mother, and I know you are, too.'

'Will you let me stay with you, darling?'

Then Audrey looked at her trim little bed, and then at her mother, and smiled.

'There is no room. What can you mean, mother dear? and I am not ill; I am never ill, am I?'

'Thank God at least for that; but you are worse than ill—you are unhappy, my dear. Will you let me help you to undress, and then sit by you until you feel you can sleep?'

But Audrey only shook her head with another smile.

'There is no need. Kiss me, mother, and bid me good-night. I shall like to be with my own self in the darkness. There, another kiss; now go, or we shall both be frozen;' and Audrey gently pushed her to the door.

'She would not let me stop with her, John!' exclaimed Mrs. Ross, as she entered her husband's dressing-room. 'She is very calm: unnaturally so, I thought; she hardly cried at

all ; she is thinking nothing of herself, only of him.'

'Do you know it is one o'clock, Emmie?' returned her husband rather shortly. He was tired and sore, poor man, and in no mood to hear of his daughter's sufferings. 'The deuce take the woman!' he said to himself fretfully, as Mrs. Ross meekly turned away without another word ; but he was certainly not alluding to his wife when he spoke. 'From the days of Eve they have always been in some mischief or other'—from which it may be deduced that Mrs. Ross was not so far wrong when she thought her husband was threatened with gout, only his *malaise* was more of the mind. He was thinking of the interview that awaited him on the morrow. 'I would as lief cut off my right hand as tell him that he must not have Audrey,' he said to himself, as he laid his head on the pillow.

Now, as Michael lay awake through the dark hours revolving many things in his uneasy brain, it occurred to him that he would send a note across to Cyril as soon as he heard the household stirring, and he carried out this resolution in spite of drowsiness and an aching head.

'MY DEAR BLAKE,' he wrote,

'Don't bother yourself about early school. I am on the spot, and can easily take your place. You will want to pull yourself together, and under the circumstances the boys would be an awful nuisance. I hope you have got some sleep.

'Yours,

'M. O. BURNETT.'

To this came the following reply, scrawled on a half-sheet of paper :

'Thanks awfully ; will accept your offer. Please tell Dr. Ross that I will come across to him soon after ten.'

'Poor beggar ! he is awake now, and pulling himself together with a vengeance. This looks well ; now for the grind.'

And Michael went down to the schoolroom and gave Cyril's class their divinity lesson with as much coolness and gravity as though his whole life had been spent in teaching boys.

Dr. Ross winced slightly as he gave him Cyril's message after breakfast, but he said, a moment afterwards : 'I intended sending for him ; but I am glad he has saved me the trouble—only I wish it were over, Mike.'

And Michael shrugged his shoulders with a look of sympathy. He had no time to say more; he must take Cyril's place in the school-room again, in spite of all Booty's shivering solicitations for a walk this fine morning. 'Booty, old fellow,' he observed, as he noticed the little animal's manifest disappointment, 'you and I are not sent into the world to please ourselves; there are "still lame dogs to help over stiles," and a few burdens to shift on our own shoulders. If our head aches, what of that, Booty? It will be the same a hundred years hence. Now for Greek verbs and general discord, so right about face!' And if Booty did not understand this harangue, he certainly acted up to the spirit of it, for he pattered cheerfully after his master to the schoolroom, and curled himself up into a compact brown ball at his feet, to doze away the morning in doggish dreams.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ross made a feint of reading his letters; but he found as he laid them down that their contents were hopelessly involved. Was it Rawlinson, for example, whom an anxious mother was confiding to his care? 'He had the measles last holidays, and has been very delicate ever since, and now this severe cold——' Nonsense! It was not Rawlinson,

it was Jackson minor, and he was all right and had eaten an excellent breakfast; but he thought Major Sowerby's letter ought to be answered at once. He never allowed parents to break his rules; it was such nonsense sending for Charlie home, just because an uncle had come from India. He must write and remonstrate; the boy must wait until the term was over—it would only be a fortnight. And then he read the letter again with growing displeasure, and found that Captain Macdonald was the name of the erring parent.

'I will settle all that,' he remarked, as he plunged his pen rather savagely into the ink-stand; and then a tap at the door made him start, and a huge blot was the result. Of course it was Cyril, who was standing at the door looking at him.

'Are you disengaged, Dr. Ross?'

'Yes—yes. Come in, my dear fellow, and shut the door.'

And then Dr. Ross jumped up from his seat and grasped the young man's hand; but his first thought was, What would Audrey say when she saw him? Could one night have effected such a change? There was a wanness, a heaviness of aspect, that made him look ten years older.

Somehow Dr. Ross found it necessary to take off his spectacles and wipe them before he commenced the conversation.

‘My poor boy, what am I to say to you?’

‘Say nothing, sir; it would be far better. I have come——’ Here Cyril paused; the dryness of his lips seemed to impede his utterance. ‘I have come to know your wishes.’

‘My wishes!’ repeated Dr. Ross in a pained voice; and then he put his hand on his shoulder: ‘Cyril, do not misjudge me, do not think me hard if you can help it, but I cannot give you my daughter.’

He had expected that Cyril would have wrenched himself free from his detaining hand as he heard him, but to his surprise he remained absolutely motionless.

‘I know it, Dr. Ross. There was no need to tell me that—nothing would induce me to marry her.’

Then the Doctor felt as though he could have embraced him.

‘Why should you think so meanly of me,’ went on Cyril in the same heavy, monotonous voice, as though he were repeating some lesson that he had carefully conned, and got by heart, ‘as to suppose that I should take advantage of

her promise and yours? If you will let me see her, I will tell her so. Do you think I would drag her down to my level—mine?

‘You are acting nobly.’

‘I am acting as necessity compels me,’ returned Cyril with uncontrollable bitterness. ‘Do you think I would give her up, even at your command, Dr. Ross, if I dared to keep her? But I dare not—I dare not!’

‘Cyril, for my peace of mind, tell me this one thing—have I ever been unjust to you in all our relations together?’

‘No, Dr. Ross. I have never met with anything but kindness from you and yours.’

‘When you came to me five months ago and told me you loved my daughter, did I repulse you?’

Then Cyril shook his head.

‘But I was very frank with you. I told you even then that I had a right to look higher for my son-in-law, but that, as you seemed necessary to my girl’s happiness, your poverty and lack of influence should not stand in your way. When I said this, Cyril, when I stretched out the right hand of fellowship to you, I meant every word that I said. I was teaching myself to regard you as a son; as far as any man could do such a

thing, I intended to take your future under my care. In all this I did you no wrong.'

'You have never wronged me, sir,' and with a low but distinct emphasis: 'God forbid that I should wrong either you or her.'

'No! My heart was always full of kindness to you. Young as you were—young in years and in work—you had won my entire respect and esteem. I thank you, Cyril—I thank you in my own and in my wife's name—that I can respect you as highly as ever.'

Dr. Ross's voice faltered with emotion, and the hand that still lay on Cyril's shoulder trembled visibly; but there was no answering gleam of emotion on the young man's face.

'You mean it kindly, Dr. Ross, but I have not deserved this praise.' He spoke coldly, proudly. 'Have I an unsullied name to offer any woman? And even if this difficulty could be got over, do I not know that my career is over? Would you—would any other man, do you think—employ me as a master? I have been facing this question all night. and I know that, as far as my worldly prospects are concerned, I am practically ruined.'

'No, no; you must not say that. There are plenty of openings for a clever man. You shall

have my help. I will employ my influence ; I have powerful friends. We might find you a secretaryship.'

'I think a clerkship will be more likely,' returned Cyril, in the same hard voice, though the pent-up pain threatened to suffocate him. 'I may have some difficulty even there ; people like their clerks to be respectably connected, and when one's father has been in prison——'

But Dr. Ross would not let him proceed.

'My poor boy, your father's sin is not yours. No one can rob you of your self-respect and stainless honour. If it were not for Audrey, I might even venture to brave public opinion and keep you myself. It might bring me into trouble with Charrington, but, as you know, I am my own master. I could have talked him over and got him to hush it up, and we could have moved your mother to a little distance. Yes, Cyril, I would have done it ; you should have fought out your battle at my side, if it were not for my child.'

'I do not know how to thank you for saying this ;' and Cyril's rigidity relaxed and he spoke more naturally. 'I shall never forget this, Dr. Ross—never, never ! But'—here his voice shook—'you will let me go—you will not make

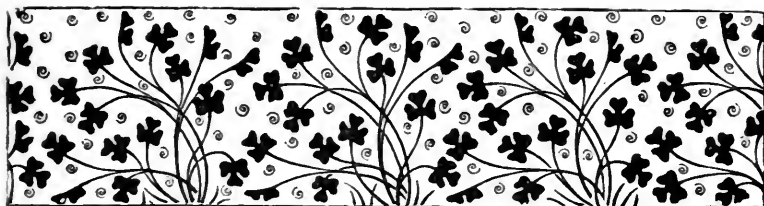
me stop when people begin to talk about it ? I am no coward, but there are some things too hard to put on any man ; and to do my work when I see on the boys' faces that they know everything—it would be the death of me. I could not stand it—no, by heavens ! I could not.'

' You shall not be asked to bear it. My poor boy, have you no faith in me ? Do you think I should ask you to perform so cruel, so impossible a duty ? From this hour you are free, Cyril ; do not trouble about your work. I can find a substitute, or, if that fails, I will do your work myself. You are ill—it will be no falsehood to say that—and in another fortnight the school will break up. Keep quiet—go away somewhere for a time, and take Burnett into your confidence ; he will be a better friend for you just now than I.'

' I doubt it, sir.'

Then the Doctor's eyes glistened with tears.

' God help you, my dear fellow ! You are doing the right, and He will. This is not good-bye ; I will see you again. Now go to her, and teach my child to do the right too.' And then Dr. Ross turned his back upon him rather abruptly, and walked to the window.



CHAPTER V.

‘ YOU WILL LIVE IT DOWN.’

‘ Sweet the thought, our lives, my love,
Parted ne’er may be,
Though between thy heart and mine
Leagues of land and sea.

* * * *

Of this twofold life and love,
Twofold running fate,
Sad and lone we may be oft,
Never desolate.’

BRITTON.

CYRIL knew where he should find Audrey ; she was generally in her own little sitting-room until luncheon. Sometimes her mother or Mollie would be with her, but this morning he felt instinctively that she would be alone.

She was sitting by the window, and there was some work on her lap, but she did not seem to be employing herself. She had bidden Cyril enter, and directly she saw him she rose from her seat and crossed the room somewhat

quickly to meet him; but he did not at once speak to her, neither did he offer his usual greeting.

She waited for a moment to see what he would do; then she put up her face to him.

‘Why do you not kiss me, Cyril?’ she said, a little reproachfully; and then he did take her in his arms.

‘It is for the last time!’ he murmured, as he pressed her almost convulsively to him.

But she made no answer to this; when he had set her free, she took his hand very quietly, and led him to a seat that stood beside her chair. His hand was cold, and she kept it in both her own as though to warm it.

‘I knew you would come to me,’ she said very softly. ‘How ill you look, my poor Cyril! You have not slept. Oh yes, I know all about it. And you have been to father, and you have both made yourselves very miserable. Do you think I do not know that? Poor father! and he is so tender-hearted.’

‘I tried to spare him,’ he returned wearily. ‘I did not wish to put him to any trouble. I must dree my own weird, Audrey.’

‘But I shall have to dree it, too. Cyril, my darling, you shall not bear your trouble alone;

it is far too heavy for you. As far as we can—as far as our duty permits, we will bear it together.' And then, as though the haggardness of his young face was too much for her, she came closer to him, and laid her head on his shoulder. 'We will bear it together, Cyril.'

'But, Audrey, my one blessing, that cannot be. Do you know what I have come to say to you this morning? That our engagement must be at an end—that you are free, quite free.'

'But I do not wish for freedom.'

'My darling, you ought to wish for it. Under the circumstances, it is quite impossible that we should ever be married. I am a ruined man, Audrey; I have lost my good name, my work, my worldly credit; my connections are disreputable. By this time you must know that I have a father living, and that his name——'

But she gently checked him.

'Yes, dear, I know all.'

'And yet you can tell me that you do not desire freedom? But that is all your goodness, and because you do not wish to pain me. Audrey, when I tell you that I must give up the idea of ever calling you my wife, it seems to me as though the bitterness of death were on me.'

'My poor Cyril!'

‘Yes, I am poor indeed ; I never dreamt of such poverty. They might have taken from me everything. and I would not have murmured, if they had only left me my faith in my mother, and if they had not robbed me of my love !’

‘She is yours still, Cyril. No, do not turn from me ; I mean it—I mean it ! If you give me up, if you say to yourself that our engagement is broken, it must be as you choose, and I must let you go. No woman can compel a man to remain bound to her. But the freedom is on your side alone ; I neither ask nor desire to be free.’

‘Darling, darling, what can you mean ?’

‘If you say that you will never marry me,’ she continued, with an air of deep sadness, ‘I suppose you will keep your word ; perhaps you are right in saying so. I would not marry you without my father’s consent, and he tells me he will never give it ; but, Cyril, you may rest assured of this, that in your lifetime I will never marry another man.’

Then he threw himself at her feet, and, taking her hands in his, begged her for very pity’s sake to stop.

‘I love you, Audrey ! I think I never loved you before as I do now ! but do you think I would permit such a sacrifice ?’

‘How are you to help it?’ she returned, with a faint smile that was very near tears; ‘and it would be no sacrifice, as far as I know my own heart. I think my one wish is to comfort you, and to make your life a little less dreary, Cyril,’ looking at him earnestly; and it seemed to him as though her face were like an angel’s. ‘You will be brave and bear this for my sake. When you are tempted to lose faith, and hope seems farthest from you, you must say to yourself: “Audrey has not deserted me; she is mine still—mine always and for ever!”’

Then he bowed his head on her hands and wept like a child. She passed her hand over his hair caressingly, and her own tears flowed; but after a little while she spoke again:

‘I have told father so, and I have told mother; I said to both of them that I would never give you up. We may live apart. Oh yes, I know that it is all very sad and miserable; but you will let me keep your ring, Cyril, because I still belong to you.’

He tried to steady his voice, and failed; all his manhood could not give him fortitude at such a moment. He could only clasp her in his arms, and beg her for her own sweet sake to listen to him.

And presently, when he was a little stronger, he put it all before her. He explained to her as well as he could the future that lay before him; the yoke of his father's sin was on his neck, and it was useless to try and break it off. He might call himself Blake, and look for new work in a new place, and the miserable fact would leak out.

'There is a fatality in such cases,' he went on. 'One may try to hush it up, to live quietly, to attract no notice; but sooner or later the secret will ooze out. I think I am prouder than most men — perhaps I am morbid; but I feel I shall never live down this shame.'

'You will live it down one day.'

'Yes, the day they put me in my coffin; but not before, Audrey.' Then, as she turned pale at the thought, he accused himself bitterly for his selfishness. 'I am making you wretched, and you are an angel of goodness!' he cried remorsefully. 'But you must forgive me, darling; indeed, I am not myself.'

'Do you think I do not know that?'

'A braver man than I might shrink from such a future. What have I done that such a thing should happen to me? I loved my work,

and now it is taken from me ; as far as I know, I may have to dig for my bread.'

'No, no !' she returned, holding him fast ; for this was more than she could bear to hear—that the bright promise of his youth was blasted and destroyed. 'Cyril, if you love me, as you say you do, will you promise me two things?'

He looked at her a little doubtfully.

'If I love you !' he said reproachfully.

'Then I will alter my sentence. I will say, because of your love for me, will you grant me these two things? Cyril, you must forgive your mother. However greatly she has erred, you must remember that it was for your sake.'

'I do remember it.'

'And you will be good to her?'

Then his face became very stern.

'I will do my duty to her. I think I may promise you that.'

'Dearest, I do not doubt it. When have you ever failed in your duty? But I want more than that : you must try so that your heart may be softer to her ; you are her one thought ; with all her faults, I think no mother ever loved her son so well. It is not the highest love, perhaps, since she has stooped to

deceit and wrong for your sake ; but, Cyril, it is not for you to judge her.'

'Perhaps not ; but how am I to refrain from judging her ? To me truth is the one absolute virtue—the very crown and chief of virtues. That is why I first loved you, Audrey—because of your trustworthiness. But now I have lost my mother—nay, worse, she has never existed !'

'I do not quite understand you.'

'Do you think my mother—the mother I believed in—could have acted this life-long lie ? Would she have worn widows' weeds, and utterly forsworn herself ? No ; with all her faults, such crooked ways would have been impossible. Audrey, you must give me time to become acquainted with this new mother. I will not be hard to her, if I can possibly help it ; but'—here the bitterness of his tone betrayed his deep agony—'she can never be to me again what she has been.'

'Then I will not press you any more, Cyril. I have such faith in you, that I believe you will come through even this ordeal ; but there is something more I must ask you : Will you let Michael be your friend ?'

'We are friends, are we not ?' he said, a little bewildered at this.

'Ah! but I would have you close friends. Dear, you must think of me—how unhappy I shall be unless I know you have someone to stand by you in your trouble. If you would let my father help you!' But a shake of the head negatived this. 'Well, then, it must be Michael, our good, generous Michael, who will be like a brother to you.'

'I do not feel as though any man could help me.'

'No one but Michael. Dear Cyril, give me my way in this. We are going to part, remember, and it may be for a long term of years; but if you value my peace of mind, promise me that you will not turn from Michael.'

'Very well; I will promise you that. Have you any more commands to lay upon me, Audrey?'

'No,' she returned wistfully; 'be yourself, your true, brave, honest self, and all may yet be well. Now go! We have said all that needs to be said, and I must not keep you. You are free, my dear one; but it is I who am bound, who am still yours as much as ever. When we shall meet again, God knows; but in heart and in thought I shall be with you wherever you may

go. Now kiss me, but you need not tell me again it is for the last time.'

Then she put her arms round his neck, and for a minute or two they held each other silently.

'My blessing, my one blessing!' murmured Cyril hoarsely.

Then she gently pushed him from her.

'Yes, your blessing. You may call me that always, if you will.' And then, still holding his hand, she walked with him to the door; and as he stood looking at her with that despair in his eyes, she motioned to him to leave her. 'Go, dearest; I cannot bear any more.' And then he obeyed her.

* * * * *

A few hours afterwards her mother found her lying on her bed, looking very white and spent.

'Are you ill, Audrey? My dear, your father is so anxious about you, and so is Michael. When you did not appear at luncheon, they wanted me to go to you at once. Crauford says you have eaten nothing.'

'Dear mother, what does that matter? I am quite well, only so very tired. My strength seemed to desert me all at once, so I thought I would lie down and keep quiet. But you must tell father that I am not ill.'

'I shall tell him how good and brave you are,' returned her mother, caressing her ; 'Audrey, did Crauford tell you that Geraldine is here ?'

Then a shadow passed over Audrey's pale face.

'No, mother.'

'She came up the moment luncheon was over to ask if you could go with her to Beverley, and of course she saw at once that something was amiss. Your father took her into the study and told her himself. She is very much upset. That is why I have left you so long.'

'I did not know it was long,' returned Audrey, speaking in the same tired voice ; 'it seems to me only a few minutes since Crauford took away the tray.'

'It is nearly four o'clock,' replied Mrs. Ross, looking at her anxiously--could it be her bright, strong girl who was lying there so prostrate ? 'Geraldine has been here nearly two hours. She sent her love to you, darling, and wanted so much to know if she could see you ; but I shall tell her you are not fit to see anyone.'

'I do not know that,' returned Audrey in a hesitating manner ; 'I was just wishing that I could speak to Michael. If you had not come

up, I think I should have put myself straight and gone downstairs. I think I may as well see Gage for a moment ; it is better to get things over.'

'But, Audrey, I am quite sure it would be wiser for you to keep quiet to-day ; you have had such a terrible strain. Everyone ought to do their best to spare you.'

'But I do not want to be spared,' returned Audrey, echoing her mother's sigh ; 'so please send Gage to me, and tell her not to stop too long. Crauford can tell her when tea is ready.' And then Mrs. Ross left her very reluctantly.

Geraldine's face was suffused with tears as she sat down beside the bed and took her sister's hand. Audrey shook her head at her.

'Gage, I don't mean to allow this ; you and mother are not to make yourselves miserable on my account.'

'How are we to help it, Audrey ?' replied Geraldine with a sob ; 'I have never seen you look so ill in your life, and no wonder—this unhappy engagement ! Oh, what will Percy say when I tell him ?'

'He will be very shocked, of course. Everyone will be shocked. Perhaps both he and you will say it serves me right, because I would not

take your advice and have nothing to do with the Blakes. Gage, I want you to do me one favour : tell Percival not to talk to me. Give him my love—say anything you think best—only do not let him speak to me.'

'He shall not, dearest ; I will not let him. But all the same, he will grieve bitterly. He knows how bad it will be for you, and how people will talk. I have been telling mother that you ought to go away until things have blown over a little.'

Audrey was silent. This was not the sympathy her sore heart needed. Geraldine's tact was at fault here ; but the next moment Geraldine said, with manifest effort :

'Cyril has behaved very well. Father seems very much impressed with his behaviour ; he says that he offered at once to release you from your engagement.'

'Yes.'

'Percy will say he has acted like a gentleman ; that is the highest praise from him. Dear—dearest Audrey, you will not think that I am not sorry for you both, when I say that this is a great relief to me ?'

'A relief to you that Cyril is free ?'

'Yes ; and that you are free, too.'

‘Ah, but I am not,’ moving restlessly on her pillow. ‘There you are making a mistake, Gage. I thought father would have told you. I am still engaged to Cyril; I shall always be engaged to him, although perhaps we shall never be married.’

‘But, Audrey——’

‘Now, Gage, we are not going to argue about it, I hope; I am far, far too tired, and my mind is made up, as I told father. I shall never give my poor boy up—never, never!—as long as he is in the world and needs me.’ Then, as she saw the distress on her sister’s face, she put her hand again into hers. ‘You won’t love me less for being so wilful, Gage? If anyone had asked you to give up Percival when you were engaged to him, do you think you would have listened?’

‘Is that not very different, darling?’

‘No; not so very different. Perhaps I do not love Cyril quite in the same way you loved Percival, our natures are so dissimilar; but, at least, he is very dear to me.’

‘Do you mean that you will break your heart because of this? Oh, Audrey!’ and Geraldine’s face was very sad.

‘No, dear; hearts are not so easily broken, and I do not think that mine would be so weak

and brittle. But the thought of his sorrow will always be present with me, and, in some sense, I fear my life will be clouded.'

Then her sister caressed her again with tears.

'But it will not be as bad for me as for him; for I shall have you all to comfort me, and I know how good you will all be. You will be ready to share even your child with me, Gage, if you think that will console me.'

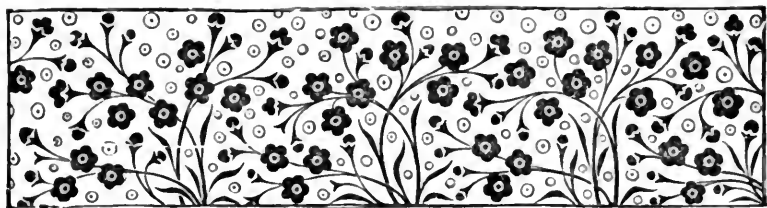
'Yes; and Percival will be good to you, too.'

'I am sure of that; only you must ask him not to speak to me. Now I am very tired, and I must ask you to leave me. Go down to mother, dear Gage.'

But it seemed as though Geraldine could hardly tear herself away.

'I will do anything, if only you will promise to be happy again,' she said, kissing her with the utmost affection. 'Remember how necessary you are to us. What would any of us do without you? To-morrow I shall bring your godson to see you.'

Then, at the thought of her baby-nephew, a faint smile crossed Audrey's face.



CHAPTER VI.

MICHAEL ACCEPTS HIS CHARGE.

‘Try how the life of the good man suits thee : the life of him who is satisfied with his portion out of the whole, and satisfied with his own just acts and benevolent disposition.’—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

MICHAEL’S morning in the schoolroom had been truly purgatorial ; fortunately for him, it was a half-holiday, and the luncheon-hour set him free from his self-imposed duties. On his way to his own room, he had overheard Geraldine’s voice speaking to her father, and he at once guessed the reason why Dr. Ross had invited her into the study.

He had never been less enamoured of solitude and of his own society ; nevertheless, he told himself that any amount of isolation would be preferable to the penalty of hearing Geraldine discuss the matter. He could hear in imagina-

tion her clear sensible premises and sound, logical conclusion, annotated by womanly lamentations over such a family disaster. The probable opinions of Mrs. Bryce and Mrs. Charrington would be cited and commented on, and, in spite of her very real sympathy with her sister, Michael shrewdly surmised that the knowledge that the Blake influence was waning would give her a large amount of comfort in the future.

When Crauford announced that the ladies were having tea in the drawing-room, he begged that a cup might be sent up to him.

‘Will you tell Mrs. Harcourt that I have a headache?’ he said; and, as Crauford delivered the message, Geraldine looked meaningly at her mother.

‘I expect Michael has taken all this to heart,’ she said, as soon as Crauford had left the room; ‘he is very feeling, and then he is so fond of Audrey.’ And as Mrs. Ross sighed in assent, she went on with the topic that was engrossing them at that moment—how Audrey was to be induced to leave home for awhile.

Michael’s table was strewn with books, and one lay open on his knee, but he had not once turned the page. How was he to read when

the very atmosphere seemed charged with heaviness and oppression ?

‘She thinks that she loves him, and therefore she will suffer,’ he said to himself over and over again ; ‘and it will be for the first time in her life, for she has often told me that she has never known trouble. But her suffering will be like a grain of sand in comparison with his. Oh, I know what he is feeling now ! To have had her, and then to have lost her ! Poor fellow ! it is a cruel fate.’

Michael pondered drearily over the future that lay before them all. How was he to bear himself, he wondered, under circumstances so exasperating ? She was free, and he knew her to be free—for Cyril would never claim her—and yet she would regard herself as altogether bound.

He must go away, he thought ; not at once—not while she needed him—but by-and-by, when things were a little better. Life at Rutherford was no longer endurable to him ; for months past, ever since her engagement, he had chafed under a sense of insupportable restlessness. A sort of fever oppressed him—a longing to be free from the influence that dominated him.

‘If I stay here I must tell her how it is with

me, and that will only make her more miserable,' he thought. 'She is not like other women—I never saw one like her. There is something unreasonable in her generosity. Girls sometimes say things they do not mean, and then repent of their impulsiveness; but she will never repent, whether she loves him or not. She believes that it is her mission to comfort him. Perhaps, if I had appealed to her, I might have made her believe that she had a different mission. Oh, my dear, if it only could have been so!'

And he sighed in the bitterness of his spirit; for he knew that in his unselfishness he had never wooed her.

At that moment there was a light tap at his door, and he started to his feet with a quick exclamation of surprise as Audrey entered. He had been thinking of her at that moment, and he almost felt as though the intensity of his thoughts had drawn her by some unconscious magnetism; but a glance at her dispelled this illusion.

She was dressed for dinner, and he noticed that there was an air of unusual sombreness about her attire, as though she felt that any gaiety of apparel would be incongruous. And

as she came closer to him, he was struck with her paleness and the sadness in her large gray eyes.

‘Michael,’ she said, in a low voice, ‘I want to speak to you. I hope I am not interrupting you.’

‘You never interrupt me,’ he returned quickly. ‘Besides, I am doing nothing. Sit down, dear, and then we shall talk more comfortably.’ For he noticed that she spoke with an air of lassitude that was unusual to her, and her strong lithe figure swayed a little, as though with weakness.

‘Do you think you should be here?’ he asked, with grave concern. ‘You look ill, Audrey, as though you ought to be resting in your own room.’

‘I have been resting,’ she replied gently. ‘And then Gage came to me, and after that I thought I had been idle long enough. Michael,’—and here her lips quivered as though she found it difficult to maintain her self-control—‘you know all that has happened. Cyril has gone away—he has said good-bye to me—and he looks as though his heart were broken. I have done what I could to comfort him. I have told him that I shall always be true to

him; but it is not in my power to help him more.'

'Dear Audrey,' he said—for he understood her meaning well, and there was no need for her to speak more plainly—'it was not for me to go to him after such a parting as that. The presence of one's dearest friend would be intolerable.'

'I did not mean to-day,' she returned sadly; 'but there is to-morrow, and there is the future. And he has no friend who is worthy of the name. Michael, there is no one in the whole world who could help him as you could. This is the favour I have come to ask you.'

'It is granted, Audrey.'

Then her eyes were full of tears as he said this.

'Oh, I knew you would not refuse! When have you ever refused to do a kindness for anyone? Michael, I told my poor boy to-day that if he valued my peace of mind he would consent to be guided by your advice. He is so young; he does not know the world as you do, and he is so terribly unhappy; but if you would only help him——'

'My dear,' he said very quietly, 'there is no need to distress yourself, or to say any more;

we have always understood each other without words. You are giving me this charge because you are unable to fulfil it yourself. You wish me to be a good friend to poor Blake, to watch over him and interest myself in his welfare—that is, as far as one man will permit another to do so. Well, I can promise you that without a moment's hesitation. I will be as solicitous for him as though he were my brother. Will that content you ?'

But he could not easily forget the look of gratitude that answered him.

'God bless you, Michael! I will not try to thank you. Perhaps some day——'

She stopped as though unable to say more.

'Oh,' he said lightly, and crushing down some dangerous emotion as he spoke, 'I have done nothing to deserve thanks. Even if you had not asked me this, do you think I would have gone on my own way, like the Levite in the parable, and left that poor fellow to shift for himself? No, my dear, no; I am not quite so flinty-hearted. Unless Blake will have none of my help—unless he absolutely repulses me—I will try as far as lies in my power to put him on his feet again.'

'He will not repulse you; I have his word

for that. Ah! there is the dinner-bell, and I have not said all that I wanted. The day seems as though it would never end, and yet there is time for nothing.'

'You will not come downstairs, Audrey? Let me ask your mother to excuse you. See! you can stay in this room; I can clear the table and put things ship-shape for you.'

But she looked at him with the same air of innocent surprise with which she had regarded her mother the previous night, when she had asked to remain with her.

'Why do you all treat me as though I were an invalid?' she said protestingly. 'I am not ill, Michael. What does it matter where one eats one's dinner? It is true I am not hungry, but there is father—why should I make him uncomfortable? We must think of other people always, and under all circumstances.'

She seemed to be saying this to herself more than to him, as though she would remind herself of her duty. Michael said no more, but as he followed her downstairs he told himself that no other girl could have borne herself so bravely and so sweetly under the circumstances.

He wondered at her still more as he sat

opposite to her at table, and saw the quiet gravity with which she took her part in the conversation. She spoke a word or two about her sister, and mentioned of her own accord that she had promised to bring Leonard to see her the next day.

‘I don’t mean to call him baby,’ she said; ‘he is far too important a personage. Did you hear nurse speak of him as Master Baby the other day? I think Gage must have given her a hint about it.’

And then she listened with an air of interest as her mother related a little anecdote that recurred to her memory of Geraldine’s babyhood.

But he saw her flush painfully when Mrs. Ross commented on her want of appetite.

‘You have eaten nothing to-day, Crauford says,’ she continued anxiously.

But Audrey shook her head.

‘One cannot always be hungry, mother dear,’ she said gently.

But it was evident that her mother’s kindly notice did not please her.

And she seemed still more distressed when her father once rose from his place to give her some wine.

‘Why do you do that?’ she asked, with a touch of impatience. ‘It is not for you to wait on me, father. Michael would have filled my glass quite easily.’

‘You are paying me a very bad compliment, Audrey,’ returned Dr. Ross with a smile. ‘You are telling me that I am too much of an old fogey to wait on ladies. Mike is the younger man, of course, and if you should prefer that he should help you to madeira——’

‘No, father, it is not that; but it is for me to wait on you. You must never, never do that for me again.’

And somehow Dr. Ross seemed to have no answer ready as he went back to his chair.

But when she was alone with her mother she spoke still more plainly. Mrs. Ross had persuaded her to take the corner of the couch; but as she stood by her manipulating the cushions and adjusting them more comfortably, Audrey turned round quickly and took hold of her hands.

‘Mother, do please sit down. I think you have all entered into a conspiracy to-night to kill me with kindness.’

‘We are so sorry for you, darling.’

‘Perhaps I am sorry for myself; but is that any reason why I should be treated as though I had lost the use of my limbs? I want you to behave to me as usual; it will be far better for me and you too. Why did not father and Michael talk politics, instead of making little cut-and-dried speeches that seemed to fit into nothing?’

‘I dare say they found it very difficult to talk at all under the circumstances.’

‘That sounds as though I had better have remained upstairs, as Michael suggested; indeed, I must do so if you will persist in regarding me as the skeleton of the feast.’

‘My darling child, how you talk! Surely you will allow your parents to share your sorrow?’

‘No, mother; that is just what I cannot allow; no one shall be burdened with my troubles. Listen to me, mother dear: I think people make a great mistake about this; they mean to be kind, but it is not true kindness; they are ready to give everything—sympathy, watchfulness, attention—but they withhold the greatest gift of all, the freedom, the solitude for which the sufferer craves.’

‘Do you mean that we are to leave you

alone, Audrey ? Oh, my dear, this is a hard saying for a mother to hear !

‘ But it is not too hard for my mother,’ returned Audrey caressingly. ‘ Yes, I would have you leave me alone until I recover myself. I would be treated as you have always treated me, and not as though I were a maimed and sickly member of the flock. Neither would I be reminded every moment of the day that any special hurt has come to me.’

‘ And I am not to ask you even to rest yourself ?’

‘ No, not even that. I would rather a thousand times that you gave me some work or errand. Mother dear,’ and here her voice was very sad, ‘ I will not deny that this is a great trouble, and that my life will not be as easy and as happy as it used to be. The shadow of my poor boy’s sorrow will be a heavy burden for me to bear ; but we must ask God to lighten it for both of us. I tell you this to-night because you are my own dear mother, and such confidence is your due ; but after to-night I shall not say it again. If you and father wish to help me, it will be by allowing me to feel that I am still your comfort ;’ and then she threw herself in her mother’s arms. ‘ Tell

father this,' she whispered, 'and ask him to give me time. One day, perhaps, I shall be more like my old self; but we must wait: it is too soon to expect much of me yet.'

'I will tell your father you are our good, dear child, Audrey, and you shall have your way.'

'Thank you; I knew you would understand. After all, there is no one like one's mother.' And then she sighed, and Mrs. Ross knew where her thoughts had wandered. 'Now, for this one evening, I will take your advice and rest. I will go up to my room now; but to-morrow'—she stopped, and then said firmly—'to-morrow everything shall be as usual.' And then she gave her cheek to her mother's kiss, and went up to her room.

Michael did not make his appearance in the drawing-room that night. To Booty's secret rapture, he put on his great-coat, and went out into the chill darkness. He had much to consider; and it was easier to make his plans under the dim March starlight. A difficult charge had been given him, and he had not shrank from it; on the contrary, he had felt much as some knight in the olden times must have felt when his liege lady had given him

some hazardous work or quest. To be sure, there was no special guerdon attached to it ; but a man like Michael Burnett does not need a reward : if he could only give Audrey peace of mind, he would ask no other reward.

He made up his mind that he would go to Cyril the next morning, and he thought he knew what he should say to him. He and Dr. Ross had talked matters over after dinner. Dr. Ross had already suggested a substitute—a young Oxford man, who was staying at the Vicarage, and who was on the look-out for a mastership.

‘I told Cyril that he had better discontinue his work,’ he went on. ‘If it were not for Audrey, he could have made some sort of shift, and kept on until the holidays ; but it would never do to run the risk of another scene between them : it would be bad for her, and it would be terrible for him. It is an awkward complication, Mike ; it would be better to get him away as soon as possible.’ And to this Michael assented.

He went round to the Gray Cottage soon after breakfast. Audrey was watering her flowers in the hall. She looked at him as he passed her, but did not speak ; of course, she

guessed his errand, for he saw her head droop a little over the flowers.

Mollie received him. The poor girl's eyes were swollen with crying, and she looked up in his face very piteously, as he greeted her with his usual kindness.

‘Where is your brother, Mollie?’

‘Do you mean Cyril? He is in his room; but no one has seen him. Oh, Captain Burnett, is it true? Mamma has been saying such dreadful things, and we do not know whether we are to believe her. Biddy tries to hush her, but she will go on talking; she is quiet now, and Kester and I crept down here. Ah, there is Kester looking at us; he wants you to go in and speak to him.’

‘Is it true?’ were Kester's first words when he saw his friend. The poor lad's lips were quivering. ‘Oh, Captain Burnett, do tell us that it is not true!’

‘I cannot do that, my boy,’ returned Michael gravely; and then he sat down and listened to what they had to tell him. He soon found that the mother's wild ravings had told them the truth. In her despair at being refused admittance to her son's room, she had given way to a frantic outburst of emotion. Biddy

had tried to get rid of them, but Kester and Mollie had remained, almost petrified with horror. What could their mother mean by telling them that she hated the sight of them, and adjuring them to go to their father?

‘Father is dead; does she wish us to be dead, too?’ Mollie had faltered. ‘Dear mamma, do let me go and fetch Cyril! You are ill; you do not know what you are saying!’ But as she turned to go, her mother had started up, and gripped her arm so fiercely that the poor child could have screamed with pain.

‘Yes, you shall fetch him, but he will not come; he will not listen to you any more than he would to me. When I implored him on my knees to open the door, he said that he was ill, and that he could not speak to me. But was I not ill, too? If I were dying he would not come to me! and yet he is my son!’

‘Dear mamma! oh, dear mamma! do you know how you are hurting me?’

‘No; it is he who is hurting me: he is killing me—absolutely killing me!—because I kept from him that his father was alive! Did I not do it for his sake—that he should not be shamed by such a father? Go to him, Mollie; tell him that you know all about it, and that

Audrey Ross will have nothing to say to him, because he is the son of a felon. Why are you staring at me? Go! go!’ And she pushed her from her so roughly that Mollie would have fallen if Biddy had not caught her.

‘Go, Miss Mollie, or you will drive her crazy with your big eyes and frightened face. Whist! don’t heed the mistress’s wild talk; it is never the truth she is telling you.’

But Mrs. Blake had interrupted the old woman; her eyes were blazing with angry excitement:

‘Where do you expect to go to, Biddy, that you tell Mollie such lies? You are a wicked old woman! You have helped me to do all this mischief! Would you dare to tell me to my face that I am not the wife of Mat O’Brien?’

‘Sorra a bit, Miss Olive; you are the widow of that honest man Blake. Heaven rest his soul!’ returned the old woman doggedly. ‘We must be having the doctors to you, Miss Olive avick, if you tell us these wild stories.’

‘Biddy, you are a false, foolish old creature! and it is you who are driving me out of my sane senses.’

But at this point Mollie fairly fled.

‘Did you see your brother?’ asked Michael,

as she stopped to dry her eyes. Kester had never uttered a word ; he left Mollie to tell her own story, and sat leaning his head on his hands. For once Mollie's loquacity was suffered unchecked.

' It was dark, and I could not see him ; it was quite late, you know—nearly twelve o'clock. He came out and listened to me ; but the passage and the room were quite dark.

' " Go down, Mollie," he said, " and tell my mother that I cannot speak to her to-night. It is quite impossible ; she ought not to expect it."

' " But she is ill, Cyril—I am sure she is dreadfully ill ; her eyes look so strange, and she is saying such things !"

' " Biddy will take care of her ; if she needs a doctor, you must go for one. But nothing on earth would induce me to see her to-night." And then he went back into his room and locked the door.'

' Poor Mollie !'

' Oh, that was nothing to what came afterwards. Would you believe it, Captain Burnett ?—mamma had heard every word. When I left Cyril, I found her crouching on the stairs in a dark corner. Oh, I shall never forget the turn it gave me ! She had got her arms over her

head, and they seemed quite stiff, and her fingers were clenched. Biddy was crying over her ; but she did not move or speak, and it was quite an hour before we could get her into her own room.'

'You ought to have sent for the doctor.'

'Biddy would not let us ; she said it was only sorrow of heart, and that she had seen her once before like that, when her husband died. What makes Biddy say that, Captain Burnett, if our father is still living ?'

Michael shook his head.

'Biddy chooses to persist in her falsehood. I have seen your father, Mollie. I am very sorry for him ; with all his faults, he loves his children.' Then a low sound like a groan escaped Kester's lips. 'And I think his children should be sorry for him, too ; he has had a hard, unhappy life. But there is no time to talk of this now ; I want you to finish about last night, and then I must go upstairs.'

'There is nothing more to tell. We could not induce mamma to undress or to go to bed, so Biddy covered her up and told me to go away. She was with her all night. With all her crossness and tiresome ways, Biddy is always good to mamma ; she was talking to her almost as

though she were a baby, for I stood and listened a minute before I closed the door. I could hear her say :

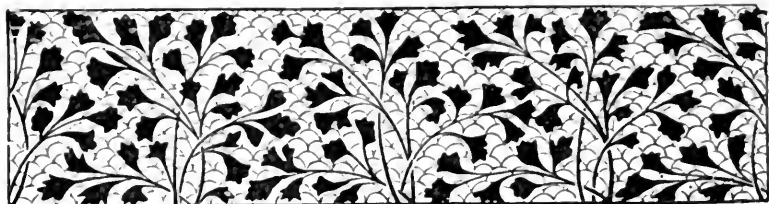
“ Miss Olive avick, what was the good of telling the children ? You should hush it up for Mr. Cyril’s sake, and for the sake of the dear young lady he is going to marry.” But he is not going to marry her ; mamma said so more than once.’

And then, in a few grave words, Michael told them all that it was necessary for them to know.

‘ Poor, poor Cyril ! Oh, my dear Miss Ross ! ’ was all Mollie could say. Kester seemed nearly choking.

‘ Let me go to him, dear Mollie. But I think I will see your mother first. Biddy seems to be a bad adviser. After all, she may require a doctor.’

And then he put his hand on Kester’s shoulder and whispered something into his ear. Mollie could not hear what it was, but she saw the boy’s face brighten a little as he took up Booty to prevent him from following his master.



CHAPTER VII.

‘THERE SHALL BE PEACE BETWEEN US.’

‘Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them, then, or bear with them.’

* * * * *

‘When a man has done thee any wrong, immediately consider with what opinion about good or evil he has done wrong ; for when thou hast seen this thou wilt pity him, and wilt neither wonder nor be angry.’—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

BIDDY was hovering about the passage, as usual. She regarded Michael with marked disfavour when he asked if he could see her mistress. In her ignorant, tortuous way, she had arrived at the conclusion that the Captain was at the bottom of the mischief.

‘Why couldn’t he leave things to sort themselves?’ she grumbled within herself. ‘But men are over-given to meddling ; they mar more than they make.’

‘My mistress is too ill to see anyone,’ she returned shortly.

‘Do you mean that she is in her own room?’ he asked.

But even as he put the question, he could answer it for himself. The door of the adjoining room was wide open, and he was certain that it was empty.

‘Sick folk do not always stop in their beds,’ retorted Biddy still more sourly; ‘but for all that, she is not fit to see visitors.’

She squared her skinny elbows as she spoke, as though prepared to bar his entrance; but he looked at her in his quiet, authoritative way.

‘She will see me, Biddy. Will you kindly allow me to pass?’ And the old woman drew back, muttering as she did so.

But he was obliged to confess that Biddy was right as he opened the door, and for a moment he hesitated on the threshold.

Mrs. Blake was half sitting, half lying on the couch in a curiously uneasy position, as though she had flung herself back in some sudden faintness; her eyes were closed, and the contrast between the pale face and dark dishevelled hair was very striking; her lips, even, were of the same marble tint. He had always been compelled to admire her, but he had done so in grudging fashion; but now he was constrained

to own that her beauty was of no mean order. An artist would have raved over her ; she would have made a model for a Judith or a Magdalene.

As he stood there with his hand on the door, she opened her eyes and looked at him ; but she did not change her attitude or address him.

Michael made up his mind that he must speak to her.

‘ I am sorry to see you look so ill, Mrs. Blake.’

He took her hand as he spoke ; it felt weak and nerveless. But she drew it hastily away, and her forehead contracted.

‘ Of course I am ill.’

‘ I hope Biddy has sent for a doctor ; I think you should see one without delay.’

But she shook her head.

‘ No doctor would do me any good. I would not see him if he came.’

Michael was silent ; he hardly knew how he was to treat her. Mollie’s graphic account of the scene last night had greatly alarmed him. Mrs. Blake was of a strangely excitable nature ; he had been told that from her youth she had been prone to fits of hysterical emotion. She was perfectly unused to self-control, and only her son had ever exercised any influence over

her. Was there not a danger, then, that, the barriers once broken down, she might pass beyond her own control? He had heard and he had read that ungovernable passion might lead to insanity; he almost believed it, as he listened to Mollie's story. This is why he had insisted on seeing her. He must judge of her condition for himself; he must do his best to prevent the recurrence of such a scene. And now, as he saw her terrible exhaustion and the dim languor in her eyes, he told himself that something must be done for her relief.

'If you send one, I will not see him,' she went on.

'I think you are wrong. For your children's sake you ought to do your best to throw off this illness that oppresses you.'

But she interrupted him.

'Why are you here this morning? Are you going to him?' she asked abruptly.

'Yes, certainly; that is, if he will see me.'

'He will see you. He would not refuse anyone who came from Woodcote. Captain Burnett, will you tell me this one thing: has that girl given him up?'

Michael hesitated.

'Your son has broken off his engagement

with Miss Ross. He felt he could not do otherwise.'

'You are not answering me straight. I do not want to hear about Cyril; of course he would offer to release her. But has Miss Ross consented to this?'

'No,' he returned reluctantly, for it pained him to enter on this subject with her; 'she has refused to be set free. As far as your son is concerned, the engagement is broken; but my cousin declares her intention of remaining faithful to him.'

'I knew it—I knew it as well as though you had told me,' returned Mrs. Blake with strong emotion; 'Audrey Ross is not the girl to throw a man over. Oh! I love her for this. She is a darling, a darling, but'—relapsing into her old melancholy—'they will never let her marry him—never, never!'

'I am afraid you are right.'

'No, he is doomed; my poor boy is doomed. If you see him, what is there that you can say to comfort him?'

'I shall not try to comfort him. I shall bid him do his duty. Comfort will come to him in no other way.'

'Shall you speak to him of me?'

‘Yes, certainly. If I have any influence, I shall bring him to you before an hour is over.’

Then she caught his hand and the blood rushed to her face.

‘God bless you for this!’ she whispered. ‘Go; do not keep me waiting. Go, for Heaven’s sake!’

‘You must promise me one thing first: that you will control yourself. Think of him, of the day and the night he has passed. He will not be fit for any scene. If you reproach him, you will only send him from you again.’

‘I will promise anything—everything—if you will only bring him.’ And now her eyes were wet; it seemed as though he had given her new life. She sat erect; she was no longer like a marble image of despair. ‘If I can only see him, if he will let me speak to him! but it is this emptiness—this blank, this dreadful displeasure—that is shutting me out from him, that is killing me by inches.’

And here she put her hand to her throat, as though the words suffocated her.

‘Be calm and quiet, and all may yet be well,’ he returned in a soothing voice; ‘I will do what I can for you and him too.’ And with a reassuring look he left her.

What had become of his dislike? He felt he no longer disliked her. She was false—falselier than he had thought any woman could be; she had qualities that he detested, faults that he, of all men, was most ready to condemn; but the one spark of goodness that redeemed her in his eyes was her love for her son.

He knocked somewhat lightly at Cyril's door, but there was no answer; but as he repeated it more loudly, Cyril's voice impatiently demanded his business.

‘It is I—Burnett. Will you let me speak to you a moment, Blake?’

And then the door was unlocked, and Cyril stood aside to let him enter; but he uttered no greeting, neither did Michael at once offer his hand. He threw a hasty glance round the room as Cyril relocked the door; the bed had not been slept in that night—that was plainly evident—but the crushed pillow and the rug flung across the foot proved clearly that he had thrown himself down fully dressed when weariness compelled him.

He had evidently only just completed his toilet: the shirt he had thrown aside was still on the floor, in company with his bath towels; and something in his appearance made Michael say:

'You were just going out. I hope I am not keeping you?'

'There is no hurry,' returned Cyril indifferently; 'I was only going out because I could not stop indoors any longer; but there is plenty of time between this and night.' And then he offered Michael the only chair, and sat down on the bed. 'This place is not fit for you,' he continued apologetically; 'but there is nowhere else where one can be quiet.'

'You are looking ill, Blake. I am afraid you have not slept.'

For there was a sunken look in Cyril's eyes that told its own tale.

'I had some sleep towards morning,' he replied, as though the matter did not concern him; 'and I dreamt that I was in purgatory. It was not a pleasant place, but I believe I was rather sorry when I woke. It is very good of you to look me up, Burnett.' And here he paused, and then said in a changed voice: 'Will you tell me how she is?'

'You mean my cousin? She is as well as one can expect her to be; but, of course, all this has been a terrible upset. She is very good and brave. She knows I have come to you.'

'Did she send you?'

‘I suppose I must say yes to that ; but I had fully intended to come. Blake, I want you to look on me as a friend. You need someone to stand by you, and see you through this ; and I think there is no one so suitable as myself at the present.’

‘You are very good ; but I can have no possible claim on you, Captain Burnett.’

Cyril spoke a little stiffly.

‘If you put it in that way, perhaps not ; in this sense, a shipwrecked sailor has no claim on the man who holds out a helping hand to him ; but I doubt whether that reason would induce him to refuse it.’

Then a faint smile came to Cyril’s dry lips.

‘You are right to choose that illustration. I think no man in the world has ever suffered more complete shipwreck. I have been trying to face my position all night, and I cannot see a gleam of hope anywhere.’

‘You must not lose heart, Blake.’

‘Must I not ? I think anyone would lose heart and faith, and hope, too, in my position. Two days ago no future could have been so bright ; I had everything—everything that a man needs for his happiness ; and at this moment no beggar could be poorer. I feel as

though I had no bread to eat, and as though I should never have appetite for bread again.'

'I understand what you mean. I had the same sort of feeling as I lay in hospital. I was covered with wounds; health was impossible; my work was gone. I could not face my life. Would you believe it, Blake?—I was the veriest coward, and could have trembled at my own shadow. It made a woman of me. I did not want to live such a crippled, meagre existence; but somehow I managed to struggle to the light.'

'Did anyone help you?'

'No, not consciously; I helped myself. At least'—in a lower voice—'the help that came to me was from a higher source. One day I will tell you about it, Blake; it was an awful crisis in a man's life, and I should not speak about it unless I thought my experience could benefit anyone. Now about yourself—have you formed any plans?'

'None; but I must get away from here.'

'I can understand that perfectly; and I must say that I think you are right. Dr. Ross and I were speaking about you yesterday; he is deeply grieved at the idea of parting with you so abruptly. He says, under any other circum-

stances (he was thinking of his daughter when he spoke) that it would have been well for you to go on with your work as usual—the change could have been made after the holidays—but he fears now that this is hardly possible. I am sure you will not misunderstand him.’

‘No ; he has decided quite rightly.’

‘He will furnish a testimonial of which any man may be proud. He told me with tears in his eyes that he never knew anyone so young with so great a moral influence ; that your work was at all times excellent, and that he had never had so high a respect for any of his masters. And he begs me to say that you may command his purse or influence to any reasonable extent. He will be truly grateful to you if you will not refuse his help.’

‘I fear I must refuse it.’ And Cyril threw back his head with his old proud gesture. ‘But do not tell him so, Captain Burnett. Give him my kindest, my most respectful regards. Say anything you like, but do not compromise me. I will take nothing but my salary from Dr. Ross.’

‘Then we will say no more about it,’ returned Michael with ready tact. ‘Every man has a right to his own independence. Have

you any place to go to when you leave here, Blake ?'

Then Cyril shook his head.

'One can always take lodgings,' he replied. 'I must go up to town and look out for some situation. I suppose, after all, my testimonials will help me.'

'Without doubt they will. What do you say to a secretaryship? I have one in my mind that I think would suit you. It is a friend of my own who is wanting someone as a sort of general amanuensis and secretary. He is a literary man and extremely wealthy, an old bachelor and somewhat of an oddity; but in his own way I don't know a better fellow.'

Cyril listened to this description with languid interest.

'It sounds as though it would do,' he replied, after a moment's reflection. 'At least, I might try it for a time. Last night I thought of going to New Zealand. I could get a mastership there.'

'That is not a bad idea; but you might try the secretaryship first, if Unwin be willing to come to terms. The work would be novel and interesting, and your mother might not like the New Zealand scheme.'

Then, at the mention of his mother, Cyril's face seemed to harden.

Michael took no apparent notice of this.

'I tell you what we will do, Blake. We will go up to town together. When would you like to start—to-morrow?' Here Cyril nodded. 'I have diggings of my own, you know, in South Audley Street. They are very comfortable rooms, and I can always get a bed for a friend. The people of the house are most accommodating. Besides, I am a good tenant. I will put you up, Blake, for any length of time you like to name. I won't promise to bear you perpetual company after the first week or so; but by that time you will find yourself quite at home. And we will interview the old fellow as soon as possible.'

'You are too good! I have no right to burden you so.'

But a ray of hope shone in Cyril's sunken eyes: he was not the outcast he had seemed to be, if this man stood by him.

'Nonsense! How can you burden me?' returned Michael briskly. 'I shall be delighted to have your company. And the rooms are always there, you know. They may as well be used.'

‘And we can go to-morrow. You see, I am accepting your generous offer; but how can I help myself? I must find work, or I should go mad.’

‘Just so, and I will help you to find it. There is some good, after all, in being an idle man: one can do a good turn for a friend. Well, we will say to-morrow. I shall be quite at your service, then; but there are two things that must be done first. Blake, do you know how ill your mother is? I was quite shocked to see her just now.’

‘Yes, Mollie told me so last night; she wanted me to come down to her, but I knew that it was far better for both of us that I should remain where I was; I was in no mood for a scene;’ and Cyril knitted his brows as he spoke.

‘You were the best judge of that, of course; but I should advise you to see her now.’

His grave tone somewhat startled Cyril.

‘Do you mean that she is so very ill?’

‘No, I do not mean that. As far as I can tell, I believe her illness is more mental than bodily; but she is evidently suffering acutely. If you leave her to herself much longer I would not answer for the consequences. Her

nature is a peculiar one, as you must know for yourself. If you could say a word to her to soothe her, I think it would be as well to say it.'

'Very well, I will go to her; but she must not expect me to say much.'

'She will expect nothing; but all the same I hope you will not be too hard on her. If you cannot extenuate her fault, you can at least remember her provocations.'

A sigh of great bitterness rose to Cyril's lips.

'I think it is hardest of all to hear you defend my mother to me.'

'I know it—it is bitterly hard. Do you think I don't feel for you? But, Blake, before we leave Rutherford, there is another duty, and a still more painful one. Surely you intend to see your father?'

'I do not see the necessity, Captain Burnett; my father is nothing to me nor I to him.'

'You are wrong,' returned Michael warmly; 'you are altogether wrong. Will you let me tell you something?'

And then he repeated the substance of his conversation with Mat O'Brien. He thought Cyril seemed a little touched, but he merely said:

'I think I need hardly see him at present;' and he added in a low voice, 'am I in a fit state to see anyone?'

'Perhaps not; but you may not soon have another opportunity, my dear fellow. Will you put aside your feelings and do this thing for my satisfaction? I have given my word to Mr. O'Brien that I will do my best to bring you together, and if you refuse I shall accuse myself of failure.'

'Oh, if you put it in that light, I do not see my way to refuse.'

'Thanks—shall we go together, or would you prefer going alone?'

'I could not bring myself to go alone.'

'Very well, then, I will drive you over in the dogcart. I am no walker, as you know, and perhaps Kester had better go with us;' and to this Cyril made no demur. 'Now I have detained you long enough, and Mrs. Blake will be wearying for you. I will bring the trap round at half-past two.'

Cyril nodded, and they went downstairs together. Michael paused for an instant at the drawing-room door:

'Be gentle with her, Blake,' he said, as he grasped his hand. 'What is done cannot

be undone ;' and then he went down to Kester.

Mrs. Blake was still in the same position. The tension of that long waiting had been too much for her, and the old faintness had returned ; but when she saw her son she struggled into a sitting posture and stretched out her hands to him as he came slowly, and almost reluctantly, towards her.

'Cyril ! my darling Cyril !' Then he took her hand and held it for a moment. 'My boy,' she said a little piteously, 'have you nothing else for your mother ?'

But he seemed as though he failed to understand her, and when she pointed mutely to the seat beside her, he did not at once seat himself.

'Mother,' he said, still speaking as though the words were difficult to him, 'I have come to tell you that there shall be peace between us.'

'Does that mean you have forgiven me, Cyril ?'

'It means that I will do my best to forgive you your share in the ruin of my life—of all our lives.'

Then she threw her arms round him with a faint cry as he stood before her ; but he gently, very gently, repulsed her.

‘Do not let there be any scene ; I could not bear it ;’ and the weariness in his voice made her heart ache still more. ‘Mother, I think that we had better never speak of these things again. As far as I am concerned, I would willingly blot out the past from my memory. To-day we must begin afresh—you and I.’

His tone made her shiver, and as she looked up in his dark impassive face, and saw the deep-seated melancholy in his eyes, a sort of despair seized her.

‘Oh!’ she cried passionately, ‘can it be my son who speaks. Blot out the past?—that happy past, when we were all in all to each other — when even poverty was delicious, because I had my boy to work for me!’

‘I shall work for you still.’

‘Yes, but will it be the same? What do I care for the gifts you may bring me when your heart has gone from me? How am I to bear my life when you treat me with such coldness? Cyril, you do not know what a mother’s love is. If you had sinned, if you had come to me and said, “Will you take my hand, red as it is with the blood of a fellow-creature?” with all my horror I would still have taken it, for it is the hand of my son.’

She spoke with a wild fervour that would have touched any other man; but he only returned coldly :

‘ And yet you had no mercy for my father ?’

Then a look of repugnance crossed her face.

‘ That was because I did not love him. Where there is no love there is no self-sacrifice ; but, Cyril, with all my faults, I have been a good mother to you.’

‘ I know it,’ he replied, ‘ and I hope I shall always do my duty by you ; but, mother, you must be patient and give me time. Do you not see,’ and here his voice became more agitated, ‘ that you have yourself destroyed my faith in my mother : the mother in whom I believed, who was truth itself to me, is only my own illusion. I know now that she never existed ; that is why I say that you must give me time, that I may become used to my new mother.’

He spoke with the utmost gentleness ; but his words were dreadful to her. And yet she hardly understood them. How could the pure rectitude, the scrupulous honour, of such a nature be comprehended by a woman like Olive O’Brien, a creature of wild impulses, whose notions of morality were as shifty as the

quicksands, whose sense of right and wrong was so strangely warped? For the first time in her life the strong accusing light of conscience seemed to penetrate the murky recesses of her nature with an unearthly radiance that seemed to scorch her into nothingness. Her son had become her judge, and the penalty he imposed was worse than death to her. Of what use would her life be to her if the idol of her heart had turned against her? And yet, with all her remorse and misery, there was no repentance: if the time had come over again, she would still have freed herself from the husband she loathed, she would still have dressed herself in her widows' weeds, and carried out her life's deception.

Cyril was perfectly aware of this; he knew all her anguish was caused by his displeasure, and by the bitter consequences that he was reaping. Her plot had failed; it had only brought disaster on him and his. If he could have seen one spark of real repentance—if she had owned to him with tears that her sorrow was for her sin, and that she would fain undo it—his heart would have been softer to her as she sat and wept before him.

'I never thought you could have been so hard to me!' she sobbed.

‘I do not mean to be hard,’ was his answer; ‘that is why I said there should be peace between us, and because I am going away.’

‘You are going!—where?’

And then he told her briefly that Captain Burnett had offered him a temporary home.

‘It is better for me to be alone a little,’ he went on. ‘When I have settled work, and you can get rid of the house, I will ask you to join me; but that will not be for some time.’

‘And I must stop on here alone? Oh, Cyril, my own boy, let me come with you! I will slave, I will be content with a crust, if you will only take me!’

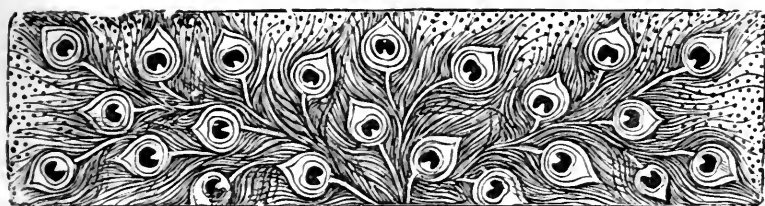
‘It is impossible, mother; I shall have no home for you. You must stay here quietly with Mollie and Kester, until my plans are more settled.’

And then he rose, as though to put an end to the discussion.

‘And you go to-morrow?’

‘Yes, to-morrow. Will you ask Mollie to look after my things?’

Then, as she gazed at him with troubled eyes, he bent over her and kissed her forehead. ‘We must begin afresh,’ he said, half to himself, as he left the room.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘WILL YOU SHAKE HANDS WITH YOUR FATHER?’

‘It is peculiar to man to love even those who do wrong. And this happens if, when they do wrong, it occurs to thee that they are kinsmen, and that they do wrong through ignorance and unintentionally, and that soon both of you will die ; and above all, that the wrongdoer hath done thee no harm, for he hath not made thy ruling faculty worse than it was before.’—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

‘To err is human ; to forgive, divine.’

THE drive to Brail that afternoon was a silent one ; grim care sat on the two young faces, and Michael, with his usual tact, devoted himself to his mare. Now and then her skittishness gave him an opportunity of saying a word or two, to which Cyril replied in monosyllables.

When they had left the inn, and were almost in sight of the cottage, Michael suddenly asked Cyril if he had ever seen Mr. O’Brien. ‘Thomas O’Brien,’ he added quickly.

‘You mean my uncle?’ returned Cyril curtly. ‘No; I have never seen him.’

‘Then I should like to tell you something about him. Of all the men I have ever known, Thomas O’Brien is the one I have most honoured. I have always had the greatest respect for him—for his honesty, integrity, and child-like simplicity. In spite of his want of culture, he is the gentleman his Creator intended him to be. Let me tell you, Blake, that you may be proud to call such a man your uncle.’ And with these words Michael unlatched the little gate, and waited for them to follow him.

They were not unperceived. Long before they reached the porch the cottage door was open, and Thomas O’Brien’s genial face and strong, thick-set figure blocked up the doorway.

Michael was about to speak, when, to his surprise, Cyril lifted his hat, and then extended his hand to the old man.

‘I believe you are my uncle, sir,’ he said quietly. ‘There can be no need of an introduction: I am Cyril, and this is my brother Kester.’

A soft, misty look came into Thomas O’Brien’s honest eyes.

‘Ay, my la!l, I am thinking I know you both,

though I have never set eyes on you before. You are kindly welcome, young gentlemen, for your own and for your father's sake.' And here he gave them a hearty grasp of the hand. 'The Captain is always welcome, as he knows. He and me have been friends for half a score of years—eh, Captain?'

'Good God! are those my boys, Tom?'

The interruption was so sudden and unexpected that they all started, and Cyril turned pale. Something familiar in the voice seemed to thrill him, like an echo from a far-off time. He turned round quickly. A tall man, with closely-cropped hair and a gray moustache, was standing behind him, and regarding him with dark, melancholy eyes.

'Those two can never be my boys, Tom!' he repeated, in the same incredulous, awestruck voice.

'Ay, lad, they are your own, surely; and you had better be thanking God for His mercy in giving you such sons than be taking the holy Name on your lips.'

But Mat did not seem to hear this mild rebuke.

'Will you shake hands with your father, Cyril?' he said, with an air of deep dejection. 'I wish it were a cleaner hand, for your sake; but I can give you no other.'

‘Do you think I would refuse it, sir?’ returned the young man, touched, in spite of himself.

And then it was Kester’s turn. But as Mat’s eyes fell on the boy’s worn, sickly face his manner changed.

‘Is that my little chap—the young monkey who used to ride on my shoulder and hold on by my hair? Dear! dear! who would have believed it?’

Kester’s pale face flushed a little.

‘You are looking at my crutch, sir,’ he said nervously; ‘but I shall soon throw it away. I am ever so much better now, am I not, Cyril?’

‘And where’s my little Mollie?’ continued Mat—‘“the baby,” as we used to call her?’

‘Let us come away,’ whispered Michael in Mr. O’Brien’s ear. ‘They will get on better without us.’

The tears were running down the old man’s face as they turned into the little parlour.

‘It beats me, sir, it beats me utterly, to see my poor lad trying to make friends with his own children, and looking so shamed before them. That is a fine-looking chap, that eldest one,’ he went on—‘Miss Ross’s sweetheart, as

I used to call him. He is the sort any girl could fancy. And he has a look of Mat about him, too, only he is handsomer and better set up than Mat ever was.

‘“I believe you are my uncle, sir.” Few young chaps would have said that. A fine fellow, and she has lost him. Well, the Almighty sends trouble to the young as well as the old. May I light my pipe, Captain? For I am a bit shaky, and all this has upset me.’

Meanwhile Cyril was saying :

‘We have not brought Mollie. If you wish to see her, she shall come another time.’

‘Thank you, my lad ; that is kindly spoken. And I have a sort of longing to set eyes on her again. But you need not think that I am going to trouble her, or you either. A man like me has no right to trouble anyone.’

How could they answer him ? But Mat did not seem to notice their silence. His eyes were bent on the ground, and he twirled his gray moustache fiercely.

‘My children belong to their mother, and not to me. I made you over to her years ago. She said I was not fit to have the charge of my own children ; and maybe she was right.

It was not a wifely speech, but I can't blame her. When you go home, tell her I'll keep my word—that I'll lay no sort of claim to any of you.'

He spoke in the slow, brooding tone that was natural to him, and the tears came into Kester's eyes as he listened.

Boy as he was, he understood the deep degradation of such words. This tall, hungry-eyed man, who stood aloof and talked so strangely, was his own father, who was voluntarily denuding himself of a father's rights—an outcast thrown over by his wife and children—an erring, and yet a deeply repentant man. Could anything be more unnatural and horrible? Kester's boyish sense of justice revolted against this painful condition of things; he longed to start up and take his father's hand.

'Do not be so miserable; whatever you have done, you are our father, and we will be good to you.' This is what he would have said; but he only looked at Cyril and held his peace.

Cyril had felt himself strangely attracted from the first. This was not the father whom he had dreaded to see, and on whose countenance he had feared to behold the stamp of the felon.

Mat's worn, gentle face and deep-set, sorrowful eyes only inspired him with pity; the haggard weariness, the utter despondency of the man before him told their own story. True, there was weakness, moral weakness; but, at least, there was no glorying in his wrong-doing. The prodigal had come home weary of his husks, and craving for more wholesome food.

'If I have done wrong, I have suffered for it,' his looks seemed to say; and Cyril's generosity responded to the appeal.

'We are all in a difficult position,' he said; 'but there is no need to make things worse than they are. It is not for us to judge our parents, neither is it our fault that all these years we have believed that we had but one. Now I know all, I feel you have not been treated fairly.'

'I thought you would have taken your mother's part, my boy,' replied Mat humbly.

Cyril's words brought him some amount of consolation, only he could not quite bring himself to believe them.

'I hope that I shall always be on the side where the right lies,' was Cyril's answer. 'I do not wish to blame my mother. I think it is best and wisest to be silent. You are a stranger to

us, and we have not even your memory to aid us. My own childish reminiscences are very vague: I can just remember a big man who used to play with us, and whom we called daddy; but I have no special recollection of him.'

'I hardly expected you to say as much as that,' and Mat's eyes brightened; 'but, after all, I doubt if I am better off in that respect than you. How am I to find my little chaps again when I look at you both—a fine grown man, and that poor sickly lad beside you? Why,' he continued in a tender, musing tone, 'the little chaps I remember had rosy cheeks and curly heads. I can feel their bare legs swarming up me now. "Give us a ride, dad!" It was always Kester who said that. He was never still a moment unless he was asleep, and then he used to look so pretty; but where shall I find him?—there is not a trace of the little rogue left in him; and when I see my girl Mollie, it will be the same.'

Kester could stand no more; he started up so hastily that his crutch slipped from under his arm, and he would have lost his balance if his father had not caught him and held him fast.

‘Why did you do that, boy? You have given me quite a fright! There! there! I will pick up your stick for you, while you stop quietly in your chair.’

But, to his surprise, Kester held him tightly by the wrist.

‘Never mind the crutch, father; I am not afraid of a tumble. Somehow, my leg gets stiff, but I don’t mind it. I only wanted to say that, if you like, I will come and see you sometimes, when I get a lift; and I will bring Mollie with me. I can’t help what mother says,’ continued the boy, his face working, ‘and I don’t mean to let her hinder us from coming. Cyril is going away, so he will not count; but I’ll bring Mollie: and though she is not your baby now, she will take to you and cheer you up.’

Kester was quite out of breath with this long speech that he blurted out, but he was hardly prepared for the result; for before he had finished a low sob broke from Mat’s lips, and he sat down shaking with emotion, and covered his face with his hands. Kester looked at him wistfully.

‘Have I said anything to hurt him?’ he whispered; but Mat’s ears caught the words.

‘No, no,’ he returned vehemently; ‘you

have put fresh life into me by speaking so kindly. It was only the word "father" that I never thought to hear. God bless you, my boy, for saying that ! I thought that she would have taught you to hate me—as she did herself.'

'I shall never hate you, father ; I would not be so wicked. If you will let me come and see you sometimes I will try to be good to you, and I know Mollie will, too. I suppose,' continued Kester doubtfully, 'that I must not ask you to come and see us in return. It is mother's house, and——'

But Mat finished the speech :

'No, my lad, you are right. Your mother and I have parted for this life.' And now he spoke with a sort of mournful dignity. 'The time was when I worshipped the ground she walked upon ; but there are limits to a man's love. When she forsook me in my shame and trouble, when she stood there taunting me in my prison cell, my heart seemed to die to her. Olive is nought to me now but a bitter memory, and if she prayed to me on her bended knees I would not enter her house.'

It was Cyril's turn to speak now.

'Yes, you are better apart,' he said in a low voice ; 'and my mother has always been

my charge. I shall tell her that she must not hinder Mollie or Kester from coming to see you. Shall you still remain here, father ?'

He said the word with some little effort, but the same brightness came into Mat's eyes.

'I think so, my lad ; I would as lief stay with Tom. All these years he has stuck to me, and I'll not forsake him now.'

'And you will be comfortable ?'

Cyril asked the question with some degree of interest, and again Mat's eyes glistened with pleasure.

'I doubt if I was ever so comfortable in my life,' he returned, without any hesitation. 'You are young, my boy, and trouble is new to you, and Heaven forbid that you should ever be able to put yourself in my place. But if you only knew what it was to bid good-night to someone again !

'It is not much of a life, perhaps,' went on Mat, with his gentle, melancholy drawl ; 'but to me it is heavenly in its peace and quiet. Prissy is sometimes a bit harassing : but, then, most women are ; but she keeps things comfortable and ship-shape, and when she has gone off to bed there is Tom and his pipe in the chimney-corner, and it is "Come and have a crack, my

lad, until it is time to turn in." Yes, yes, I'll bide with Tom and be thankful.'

'Then we will come and see you here sometimes,' returned Cyril, rising; 'for myself I cannot answer at present——' He paused, and then continued hurriedly: 'I shall not see you again for some time. I am leaving Rutherford.'

'Yes, lad, I know,' and Mat sighed heavily; 'and it is all through me that you are going. I wanted the Captain to hush it all up; but he would not hear of it. When I think of all I have brought on you, I wonder you can bring yourself to speak a kind word to me.'

'It is not all your fault; but I cannot talk of myself. Good-bye, father. If we do not meet again for some time, it will be because things are going badly with me; but I shall always be ready to help you, if you need my assistance.'

'Thank you, my boy,' returned Mat huskily. And then it was Kester's turn.

'I shall come soon, very soon, and Mollie will be with me.'

'Mollie!' Mat repeated the name in fond, lingering fashion as he moved to the window. 'My little girl! I wonder if she is like Olive? Cyril is; he has all her good looks, but he has

something in his face that Olive never had. I almost felt shamed when he called me father ; but the other one—he is not my little chap, and yet he is—but somehow when he spoke my whole heart seemed to go out to him.' And then Mat tried to light his pipe, only his hand trembled too much to do it. 'If I could only have my life back again!' he said to himself with a groan.

Cyril hardly broke the silence once during the drive back. It was not until several days had passed that Michael heard how that interview with his father had affected him. Cyril said very little even then, but Michael was relieved to find that, on the whole, he had been more attracted than repelled.

'Kester likes him, and in a way I like him too,' he remarked ; 'we both think he has been hardly used. My mother could have kept him straight—there is no doubt of that—but she never tried to do so. One is sorry for that sort of weakness, even if one cannot understand it,' finished Cyril, with the feeling that there was nothing more to say.

Michael left them at the cottage and drove on to Woodcote. His day's work had been somewhat arduous, and he felt fagged and

weary. It was long past tea-time, he knew, but he wondered if he could ask Crauford to bring him some. Michael's long years of ill-health made him depend on this feminine panacea for all ills more than most men. That Michael hated to miss his tea was a well-known fact in the Ross household.

Another time Audrey would have cared for his comforts, he thought, as he dragged himself up the stairs in a spiritless manner. Tired Nature was avenging herself in her usual fashion, and Michael's head and limbs were aching. Perhaps something else ached too.

But his mood changed when he entered his room. After all, he had not been forgotten. A cheery little fire burnt and spluttered as though newly lighted, and a tiny kettle sang merrily on its trivet; the tea-tray was on the table, and, as Michael regarded these preparations with an expression of satisfaction, he heard Audrey's well-known knock at the door.

'Shall I make your tea, Michael,' she asked, 'or would you rather be alone? Gage and Percival are downstairs, and, as I was sure you would be tired, I told Crauford to bring up the kettle. Shall I stay or not?' she continued, a little surprised by his silence.

'Stay, by all means !' was his only reply, as he threw himself into his easy-chair.

He would have thanked her—and she evidently expected to be thanked—but he was afraid he should say too much. She had thought of him and his comfort in her own unhappiness, though her face was still pale with her inward trouble.

'You have had a trying day,' she continued, as she knelt down on the rug a moment to coax the fire to burn more brightly; 'and of course it has taken it out of you. I was quite sure that you would not be in the mood for Gage and Percival. Percival is very kind, but somehow he is not restful; he is so very bracing.' And she sighed as though she had found him so.

'People are not always in a condition for a tonic, are they, Audrey?'

'No,' she replied quietly; 'and then it is no use forcing it on them. But I must not be hard on Percival; he was very kind, only somehow his conversation was a little too bracing. He and Gage were full of plans; they meant it all for my good: but it was a little tiring.'

'Poor child!' and Michael's sympathizing tone was very healing.

‘But we will not talk about my silly self,’ rousing herself; ‘there is something else I want to know. I guess where you have been this afternoon. You have taken Cyril to see his father.’

‘Yes; and Kester too.’

‘I am very glad,’ forcing a smile. ‘It was right—quite right. He will be the happier for not shirking his duty.’

Then she looked at Michael a little pleadingly, as though to beg for some account of the interview.

‘I am afraid I cannot tell you much,’ he returned, feeling sorry that he had so little to communicate. ‘As far as I could see, Blake behaved uncommonly well; he shook hands with O’Brien at once. But, of course, after that I only thought it right to efface myself.’

‘But surely Cyril has spoken of his father?’

‘No, he has not said a word; but I dare say he will open out more by-and-by. I am going up to town with him to-morrow, and we shall have plenty of opportunity if he feels disposed to talk.’

‘Are you going to stay?’

‘Well, yes—he is hardly fit to be left just now. I shall put him up at South Audley

Street, and then he can look about him for a bit. I dare say I shall be back in a week or two.'

'Oh, Michael, I never thought of this. Are you sure it will not trouble you?'

'Not a bit,' he returned cheerfully. 'I want to see my lawyer, and do one or two things; so it comes quite handy.'

But this plausible pretext did not in the least deceive her.

'It is no use saying what I think,' she said hurriedly, and he saw the gleam of a tear on her eyelash. 'No one but yourself would ever do such things. I shall miss you—I think I shall miss you more than ever—but it will be such a comfort to feel you are with him.'

'Oh, as to that, he will not need me long. When I see him fairly settled I shall come home. I want to speak to Unwin about him. You have often heard me speak of Unwin: he is nearly old enough to be my father; but we are great chums, and I mean to tell him the whole story about Blake. If I could only get Unwin to stand his friend, there will be some hope for him.'

'Yes, I understand; but it is you who will be his benefactor. Don't frown, Michael, I

am not going to thank you; I cannot. Now please tell me one other thing before I go: will you write to me?’

‘If you wish it,’ he replied without hesitation. ‘Oh yes, I will certainly write and let you know how we are getting on; but I think it might be as well for you not to answer my letters.’

A flush came to Audrey’s face, but she perfectly understood the delicacy that induced Michael to make this stipulation; he would deprive himself of one of his greatest pleasures rather than Cyril should be pained by the sight of her handwriting.

‘I will not write,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Now I must go down to Gage.’

But he detained her.

‘Wait a moment; there is no hurry, is there? And it is my turn to ask questions. I want to know what you are going to do with yourself during my absence?’

And there was no mistaking his anxiety, though he strove to hide it.

‘I shall do as usual,’ she returned tranquilly. ‘Mollie will come to me every morning, and we shall work hard at our lessons, and——’

But he interrupted her.

'Are you sure that your father will approve of Mollie's visits?' he asked.

'There is no reason why he should disapprove,' she replied quickly; 'but of course I shall speak to him. There can be no possible reason why my poor Mollie should be punished. Father would not wish me to go to the Gray Cottage, and, indeed, I should not wish it myself; but there can be no objection to Mollie coming here.'

'Perhaps not; and, after all, it will not be for long.'

'No, it will not be for long; so I must do my best for her. Don't trouble about me, Michael; I shall be as busy as possible. I am not going away with Gage, as she wishes. I tell her I would rather stay quietly with father and mother—perhaps next holidays—but we need not talk of that.'

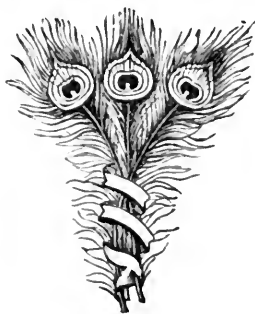
'But you will be very dull.'

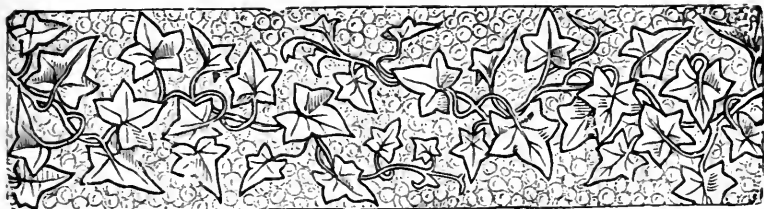
'No, indeed, I shall have too much to do—at least, I do not mean to think whether I am dull or not; but, Michael, I shall depend for a great deal of my comfort on your letters.'

Then he knew that the burden of her lover's unhappiness was very heavy upon her, but that she would not willingly speak of it even to him.

‘I will tell you all that there is to tell. If you do not hear from me, it will be because there is nothing to say;’ and with these words he let her go.

He did not speak to her again that evening; for though Mr. Harcourt had taken his departure, Geraldine had remained, with the amiable intention of cheering her sister. If she did not quite succeed in her mission, it was for no want of effort on Audrey’s part, who, as usual, did her best for everyone. But more than once Michael detected a weary look in her eyes, that told him that she would fain have been left alone. ‘But that is the last thing that Gage and Harcourt would ever do,’ he said to himself, with a shade of bitterness, as he saw the gentleness and patience with which Audrey received her sister’s attentions.





CHAPTER IX.

MICHAEL'S LETTER.

‘Be not ashamed to be helped ; for it is thy business to do thy duty, like a soldier in the assault on a town. How then, if being lame, thou canst not mount up on the battlements alone, but with the help of another it is possible.’—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

ABOUT a week afterwards, Michael was writing in his sitting-room in South Audley Street when Cyril Blake entered the room. He put down his hat and began taking off his gloves as he stood by the table.

‘Well,’ asked Michael, looking up from his cheque-book ; ‘have you hit it off, old man ?’

‘Yes ; we have settled it,’ returned Cyril, dropping into a chair as though he were tired. ‘And I am to enter on my duties next week.’

‘Next week ! That is uncommonly short notice. Unwin must be in a precious hurry to close with the bargain.’

‘He is in a hurry. He says his work is all

in arrears, and that his publishers want his book on "Cyprus" as soon as he can let them have it; and the papers are all in confusion. Of course I let him know that I was in no need of a holiday, and that I would far rather commence work at once. Mr. Unwin was most kind and considerate. My hours are to be from ten to six; so I shall be able to give a lesson or two in the evening.'

'You know my opinion on that subject; but I fancy I have exhausted all my arguments for no purpose.'

'I am afraid so too,' returned Cyril quietly. 'Mr. Unwin thinks he can find me a pupil—a young fellow who is behindhand with his classics, and has got plucked in his examination. Really, Burnett, I am extremely indebted to you for this introduction to Mr. Unwin. In spite of his peculiarities, he seems to have an excellent heart.'

'Oh yes; he is an out-and-out good fellow. I can tell you some anecdotes that are very much to his credit, only I know he would never forgive me. Unwin likes his kind actions to blush unseen. Shall you think me impertinent, Blake, if I ask what amount of salary he means to give you?'

‘Not in the least; you have every right to know. I am to have a hundred and twenty pounds a year—that is only thirty pounds less than I had at Rutherford. I never expected such good pay.’

‘Ah! Unwin can afford it.’

‘He seemed to say so. One thing—he thought I was older than I am. He seemed quite surprised when I told him I was only three-and-twenty.’

Michael looked up a little sharply. There was no denying that Cyril looked older—even these few days had worked some indefinable change in him. He was not ill, though he could not be said to be well; but there had come to him a certain settled look that one sees on the faces of middle-aged men who have a large amount of care. And there were dark circles round his eyes, as though sleep had to be wooed with some degree of difficulty.

‘You are tolerably youthful still, Blake,’ he said, not liking to admit that he saw this change in him.

‘Am I? I should not have said so from my own feelings. I fancy youth is rather a relative term; but I must acknowledge that Mr. Unwin treated me with a great deal of consideration.

I know what you have told him ; but he scarcely alluded to it, except in the most distant way : indeed, I am very grateful to him for his delicacy.'

'I told you from the first that he was a good fellow. Unwin is what I call an all-round man. He is a bit fussy over his hobbies, but as long as you keep Charles the First out of your conversation I fancy it will be plain sailing. I hope you are not bursting with the subject, as the immortal Mr. Dick was, when he found himself compelled to fly his kites ; but it is a fact that Unwin is a bit cranky about him.'

'Thank you for warning me,' returned Cyril, with a grave smile ; 'now, my next business will be to look out for some lodgings within an easy distance of Cromwell Road. I have trespassed on your kind hospitality long enough.'

'Nonsense !' returned Michael bluntly. 'I expected you to stop on here for at least another month. I shall go back to Rutherford in a fortnight or so ; but that would not make any difference to you : my old woman would be delighted to cook for you, and make you comfortable. You know, her husband was an old corporal in our regiment ; but an amputated

leg, and a little bit of money coming to his wife, made him fall out of the ranks. I have lodged with them for about ten years, and I have been in no hurry to change my quarters.'

'No—they are very comfortable; but the fact is, Burnett, my mother gives me no peace. She writes every day to beg me to take her away from Rutherford. She says she will never go outside the gate as long as she remains there. I imagine she has a nervous dread of meeting my father; besides, she says everyone will be talking about her.'

'I do not believe a single person in Rutherford has begun to talk.'

'So I tell her; but she will not believe me. You know my mother; it is not always easy to manage her. She will be quieter when she has once got away; so, with many thanks for all your kindness, Burnett, I will just look out for these lodgings.'

'Well, if your mind is made up, I will not try to change your determination; but, if you will excuse my plainness of speech, I think it would be better for you to be without your mother for another week or two.'

'I dare say you are right,' replied Cyril

wearily ; 'and my quiet life here has been a great boon. But it does not do to think only of one's self. And, after all, nothing matters much. Perhaps Mrs. Johnson may know of some good rooms ; they must be furnished, for of course it would never do to move our furniture under the present unsettled state of things. Besides, ours is too old to bear another journey. My mother can bring away the books, and her bits of china, and any little thing she fancies, and Biddy can mount guard over the rest until we can dispose of it. I dare say I can soon get the house off my hands.'

'There will be no difficulty about that,' returned Michael, inwardly wondering at Cyril's cool, business-like tone ; in his heart he admired him all the more for his pluck. 'Paget is looking out for a house—you know he expects to be married shortly—shall I write to him and give him a hint that you want to find a tenant for the Gray Cottage ? I dare say the landlord will be glad for him to take it.'

'If you will be so good. I forgot all about Paget. But he would turn up his nose at our old carpets ; his bride-elect is rather a grand lady.'

Cyril's tone was a trifle cynical ; but Michael

would have forgiven him if his speech had been flavoured with the gall of bitterness.

‘Very well, then ; I will write to him before country post, and we will have up Mrs. Johnson and talk to her.’

And Cyril at once rang the bell.

Two days afterwards Audrey received her first long letter from Michael. A brief note was all that had yet reached her.

‘MY DEAR AUDREY,’ it began,

‘I hope that you will not think that I have forgotten you ; but when there is literally nothing to say, I am rather a bad hand at cooking up a letter ; and I had not a single fact to go upon, except to tell you that, on the whole, we were pretty fit, and were jogging along somehow. Well, I have a whole budget of facts now, and my pen has become a valuable implement.

‘First, then, Blake has come to terms with Unwin ; and he is to begin work on Monday. I believe in his heart he would still prefer the New Zealand scheme ; and if we could only get rid of his mother—not an easy task that—I should be inclined to give him a helping hand in that direction ; but as Blake does not see his way clear to leave her, he may as well take

the berth offered to him. Privately, I believe Unwin is hugging himself under the idea that he has got a treasure. He spoke of him to me as a highly intelligent fellow and a first-rate Greek scholar, which we know he is. His hours are pretty light—from ten to six—so he will have his evenings to himself; but I am sorry to say he means to look out for pupils. I have talked myself hoarse on the subject; but he will not listen to reason. Of course his health will suffer: he has always been accustomed to so much fresh air and exercise. If I could only induce him to join a cricket or tennis club! But it would never do to propose it just now; he has no heart for play.

‘One thing, he has given in to me about Kester, though I had some difficulty with him at first. We had a long talk last night, and I employed all my eloquence to bring him to see the thing in its right light; and at last he consented that I should have my way.

‘Do you remember my telling you about George Moore—that nice fellow who got into trouble with his rector? Well, he has married lately, and his wife is a very nice woman. Moore has taken a good house at Brighton. He has a curacy at Kemp Town, and he is

looking out for a few pupils to prepare for the university.

‘I am going to send Kester to him for a year or two, until he is old enough to go to Oxford. Abercrombie tells me the sea air will do him a world of good. I have just written to him to come up at once, as he must have a proper outfit. And now I must tell you that Blake has found some very good rooms, Kensington way. I went down with him yesterday, and I think they will do very well.

‘There is a good-sized drawing-room—a sunny, cheerful room, with a smaller one behind, where Blake can work with his pupils—and two good bedrooms. Biddy (how I wish she were not to be of the ménage!) will have to content herself with a dull slip of a room on the basement. Of course the furniture is shabby, and there is very little of it; but I mean to introduce a few improvements by degrees. I like the look of the woman of the house. She is a widow, and is evidently very respectable. Her daughter, a very tidy sort of person, waits on the lodgers.

‘I think I have told you about all now. Blake has thawed lately, and we have long talks together, though perhaps they are not cheerful ones.

On the whole, I think he shows a great deal of pluck. I doubt whether any other young man of his age would behave as well. If the Victoria Cross were ever given for moral heroism, I am sure Blake would get it.

'Good-bye until we meet. I suppose I shall be back in another week or ten days. Take care of yourself, my dear, for the sake of your affectionate friend and cousin,

'MICHAEL.'

'There is no one like Michael!' was Audrey's inward comment as she put down the letter.

How simply he had told her his intentions with regard to Kester! as though his generosity were a matter of course. How few men of Michael's age would have cared to saddle themselves with such a responsibility! for one, too, who was not their own kith and kin.

'It will cost him at least two hundred a year,' she thought; 'no wonder my poor Cyril found it difficult to accept such an offer. He would take nothing from Michael for himself, but he could hardly refuse for Kester. Michael has virtually adopted him, just as I should like to adopt Mollie. I suppose he thinks he will have no son of his own, and there is all that money——'

And she sighed a little as she thought of Michael's loneliness.

But if she had only known it, Michael's real generosity was shown in those lines he had written at the end of his letter. His munificence to Kester cost him far less than those few words which he wrote so ungrudgingly of his rival ; but he knew how they would gladden her heart. The old beautiful smile would come to her lips, he thought, as she read them.

'They will please her more than all the rest of the letter,' he said to himself.

Two or three evenings after this letter had reached her, Audrey went into her father's study, as usual, to bid him good-night ; but when he had kissed her with that special tenderness which he had shown to her ever since her trouble, she looked at him very seriously.

'Father,' she said, as he kept his arm still round her, 'I wish you to know that I am going to the Gray Cottage to-morrow to bid Mrs. Blake good-bye.'

Then Dr. Ross's arm dropped from her waist, and she saw at once that the news was not palatable to him.

'Is that necessary, Audrey ?'

'Yes, father ; I think I may say that it is

necessary. I have kept away from the Gray Cottage all this time because I knew that it was your wish that I should do so, and I have ever been guided by your wishes ; but now Mrs. Blake is going away, and it would trouble me greatly if she were to leave without my bidding her good-bye.'

'I think it would be far better, for her sake as well as yours, that there should be no special leave-taking.'

'There I must differ from you, father dear,' returned Audrey gently. 'I could not bring myself to put such an affront on Cyril's mother. You know, I am still engaged to Cyril, and his mother can never be a stranger to me.'

Then Dr. Ross regarded his daughter with a grieved expression.

'My own child, if you would only be guided by me in this !—if you would give up this young man entirely——'

Then she shook her head, and a grave, sweet smile came to her lips.

'Would you have³ me break my word, father, because Cyril has broken his? But I do not blame him—he was obliged to do it ; but no power on earth could compel me. Dear, why should we speak of this thing—you and I?

When one's mind is made up, there is nothing more to be said. In everything else I will obey you as a child ought to obey her father. If you tell me that I must not go to the Gray Cottage to-morrow, you shall be obeyed, no matter what it may cost me ; but'—pressing her lips to his forehead as she leant against him—'I do not think my father will be such a tyrant.'

'I have no wish to tyrannize, Audrey,' returned Dr. Ross sadly. 'In all I have said, I have only considered your happiness. If you feel that there is this need to bid Mrs. Blake good-bye, I shall certainly not prevent you. I know I can trust my daughter. I have wished that the break should be final and conclusive, but it seems that you think otherwise.'

'After to-morrow the separation will be as complete as you desire it to be.'

'I am thankful to hear it. Of all women, I believe Mrs. Blake to be the most unsatisfactory. Audrey, my child, at the risk of paining you, I must say one word. There must be no written communication between her and you.'

'No, father ; I should not wish it. Any such letters would be impossible—at least, to me. Mollie will write to me sometimes, and I

suppose I shall answer her letters ; but she will not write often.'

' I think I should tell her to write as seldom as possible. Mollie is a nice little girl, and we are all fond of her ; but I should be inclined to doubt her discretion.'

Then Audrey smiled faintly, and promised that Mollie's correspondence should be enclosed within strict limits. She knew well what her father meant. Mollie's letters would be overflowing with allusions to her brother ; her simplicity would know no reticence.

' I think you may trust me,' she said, after a moment's silence. ' Of course I understand what you mean.'

' Then in that case we will not say any more about it,' replied her father. ' Trust her !—he knew that he could absolutely rely on her. When had she ever disappointed him ? Of all girls, he had never known one so free from guile, so utterly transparent ; there could be no shadow of doubt in his mind concerning her. And as he kissed her, and again wished her good-night, he blessed her in his heart for being such a daughter to him.

Audrey had carried her point. Her visit to Mrs. Blake had appeared to her in the light of

an imperative duty ; but it may be doubted whether she looked forward to it with any feeling of pleasure.

Up to the present time she had spoken as little as possible of Mrs. Blake. She had only said a word or two to Cyril, begging him to make peace with his mother ; she had asked him to soften his heart to her. ' With all her faults, I think no mother ever loved her son so well,' she had told him. ' It is not the highest love,' she had continued, ' since she has stooped to deceit and wrong for your sake. But it is not for you to judge her.' And she knew instinctively that her pleading had had weight with him.

But though she had found words to defend her, she knew that Mrs. Blake could never be to her the friend she had been ; and the shock of this discovery had been dreadful to her. She might still love and pity Cyril's mother ; she might even be desirous of serving her ; but the charm was broken, and, as far as Audrey's happiness was concerned, it might be well that the distance was widened between them.

When she rose the next morning, she felt as though some difficult and painful duty lay before her ; and as she walked towards the cottage in

the sunshine of an April afternoon, she told herself that her visit must not be a long one.

A rush of bitter-sweet memories came over her as she pushed open the green gate for the last time, and Zack bounded to meet her. As she stooped to caress him, and he rested his glossy head against her with a dog's unreasoning adoration, she said in a low voice: 'Zack, old fellow, you will be glad to be with your master again.' And he whined, as though in joyful assent.

There were no signs of either Mollie or Biddy, so she went up as usual—unannounced. The drawing-room door was open, and as her footsteps sounded in the passage Mrs. Blake came quietly out. She stepped back as she saw Audrey, and a slight colour came to her face.

'It is you—at last!' she said abruptly; but there was no other greeting.

'Yes, it is I,' returned Audrey, kissing her, and speaking in her usual tranquil manner. 'Do you think I should have let you leave Rutherford without bidding you good-bye?'

Then Mrs. Blake's eyes had a dangerous gleam in them.

'How could I know that they would let

you come?' she said almost harshly. 'Am I not a pariah, an outcast from all respectable society? Does not Dr. Ross think so, as well as that excellent sister of yours? Do you know what my life has been during the last fortnight, since my boy left me? I have not dared to leave my own gate; if I were stifled for air, I would not venture to stir out, for fear of seeing a face I know.'

'You need not have been afraid; no one in Rutherford has heard your story.'

'But they may have heard it by this time. You forget that Dr. Charrington and Mr. Harcourt have been told. A man would never keep such a secret from his wife. Mrs. Charrington may have told it to half the masters' wives by this time; this is why I have begged Cyril to take me away, because my life is unendurable.'

'You are going to him now,' observed Audrey soothingly, for she saw at once that Mrs. Blake was in one of her unhappy moods.

She was thin and pale, and there was a sharpened look about her features, as though her inward excitement had worn her.

'Yes, I am going to him; but what good will my life be to me? He has forgiven me—

at least, he says so—but every hour of the day his sadness will be a reproach to me. When I see his unhappiness, how am I to bear it, when I know it is all my fault? Audrey, tell me one thing: you are still engaged to him?’

‘Yes,’ returned Audrey very softly, ‘I am still engaged to him.’

‘Captain Burnett told me so; he said you had refused to give him up. Oh, my darling, how I loved you when he said that! It was brave of you to say such words, but my boy deserves them. If ever a girl was worshipped, he worshipped you.’

‘Dear Mrs. Blake, I think we will not speak of that.’

‘Why should we not speak of it? It is the only thing that will comfort me, and him too. Ah, if you only loved him as he loves you, there would be no difficulty. Many a girl has given up more for her lover than you will ever be asked to give up, and has found her reward in a happy life.’

‘I will not pretend to misunderstand you,’ returned Audrey simply; but she felt as she spoke that her father had been right to dread this interview. ‘I know what you would in-

sinuate — you would have me marry Cyril without my parents' consent.'

'I would,' was Mrs. Blake's unabashed reply; 'and where would be the harm, Audrey? You are of age; you have your own money. No one has a right to prevent your marriage. Of course, your people would be angry at first, but after a time they would relent. My darling girl, think of it: would it not be a noble act of self-sacrifice? And it would save Cyril!'

'He would not wish to save himself at the risk of my happiness and peace of mind,' she replied calmly. 'Dear Mrs. Blake, how strange that you should not know your own son better than that! Cyril would never marry me without my father's consent, neither would I marry him. Under such circumstances we should both be wretched.'

'And you call that love?' returned Mrs. Blake with a sneer. 'I am different from you, Audrey. I would have given up home, country, everything, for the sake of the man I loved; that is why I hated Mat, because I was bound to him, and the other man was free. It just maddened me! What!' interrupting herself, 'are you going to leave me?'

'It is useless to stay,' returned Audrey, in

a pained voice. 'If you talk like this, it is far better for me to go.'

Then Mrs. Blake burst into passionate tears, and clasped her in her arms.

'Going! when I have never thanked you for your goodness to my boy; when I have never told you how dearly I have loved you for it! Audrey, forgive me, and stay with me a little, and I will try not to talk so wildly. It makes me feel better only to look at you—and you used to love me a little.'

Then very reluctantly Audrey suffered herself to be persuaded, and to remain for another half-hour.





CHAPTER X.

MOLLIE GOES INTO EXILE.

‘There are some natures that cannot unfold under pressure, or in the presence of unregarding power. Hers was one. They require a clear space round them, the removal of everything which may overmaster them, and constant delicate attention.’—MARK RUTHERFORD.

AUDREY had no cause to regret her concession. Mrs. Blake quieted down the moment she resumed her seat ; and though the remainder of her conversation concerned herself and Cyril, she did not venture again on any dangerous allusion.

It was only when Audrey said that she must really go, as she had promised her mother to be back by tea-time, that she made an attempt to coax her into sending Cyril a message ; but Audrey’s strong sense of honour made her proof against this temptation. She would send

him no message at all. Even if she thought it right to do so, how could she rely on Mrs. Blake's veracity? how could she be sure that it might not be delivered with annotations from her own fertile brain?

'But you will at least send him your love?' pleaded Mrs. Blake.

'There is no need for me to send him that,' returned Audrey with rising colour. 'Indeed, there is no need of any message at all: Cyril and I understand each other.'

And then Mrs. Blake cried a little and called her a hard-hearted girl, and then relented the next minute, and kissed her affectionately.

'You will tell Mollie to come to me as usual to-morrow?' were Audrey's parting words, and Mrs. Blake nodded assent.

As Audrey opened the green gate some impulse made her look back. Mrs. Blake was still on the threshold, watching her, and her large dark eyes were full of tears. There was something pathetic in her appearance. With a sudden impulse, for which she was unable to account, Audrey went back and gave her another kiss.

'We do not know when we shall meet again,'

she said in a low voice. 'Try to be as happy as you can, and to make him happy too.'

She was glad that it was over, she told herself, as she walked back to Woodcote; nevertheless, she could not shake off a certain sense of depression. That dear Gray Cottage—how she had grown to love it, and what happy hours she had passed there, sitting by that window and watching the pigeons fluttering among the arches! Her heart was soft towards the woman she had left. Could she help it, she thought, if her moral sense were blunted and distorted? There was something defective and warped in her nature—something that seemed to make her less accountable than other people. Truth was not dear to her, or her marriage-vows sacred in her eyes. How came it that she and Matthew O'Brien should have a son like Cyril? Audrey's girlish brains grew confused over questions that might well baffle a psychologist; she could make nothing of them.

Mollie came to her the next morning with her eyes swollen with crying.

'Oh, dear Miss Ross!' she exclaimed, the moment she entered the room, 'do you know mamma says that we are going away to-morrow? I thought it was to be next week,

and Biddy thought so too ; but mamma says that Cyril is all alone in the lodgings, and that we ought to go to him at once. Biddy and she are packing up the books and things, and mamma seemed to think that I ought to have remained to help her ; but I told her that I must—I must say good-bye to my dear, dear Miss Ross ;' and here Mollie gave her a low-spirited hug.

'My dear Mollie,' returned Audrey kindly, 'I have arranged that already with your mother, and you are to spend the whole morning with me. We will not do any lessons ; I can see you are not fit for them. And it is such a lovely morning. We will go in the garden, and sit on that nice sunny seat overlooking Deep-water Chine. Do you remember our voyage there, and how contemptuous you were about the scenery ?' but this allusion to one of the happiest days she had ever spent in her young life only brought on a fresh burst of grief.

Poor Mollie was broken-hearted at the idea of leaving her friend, and it was a long time before Audrey could induce her to look at things in a less lugubrious light. Michael, prowling about with his cigarette, and followed closely by his short-legged favourite, came upon

them sitting hand in hand on a bench near the pond ; but he was careful not to betray his presence, and he called off Booty rather sternly when the affectionate little animal showed some disposition to join his friends. Neither of them saw him. Audrey was talking earnestly, but he only heard a fragment of what she was saying.

‘So you see, dear Mollie,’ she went on, in a soft, persuasive voice, ‘that you will be as great a comfort to me when you are away as you have been here. When I think of you all, I shall say to myself: “Mollie is taking care of them.”’

‘Yes, I see ; and indeed, indeed I will try to do my best for Cyril and mamma,’ replied Mollie, with a sob. ‘I know how unhappy poor Cyril is ; and mamma will not be the comfort to him that she used to be. Is it not sad to think of it, Miss Ross ? Mamma sometimes shows me his letters—she always did, you know—but somehow they seem so different. I wonder sometimes if she notices the change in them ; but she never says so. He does not want her to come up to London—one can see that so plainly—he keeps begging her to be patient, and give him time to settle things.

But you know mamma : she is always in such a hurry—she never can wait for anything,' finished Mollie, in her artless way.

Audrey suppressed a smile. Mrs. Blake's children certainly read her truly ; but with all her faults they loved her well. Perhaps Kester had stood aloof from her most ; but Mollie had always been devoted to her mother.

'You will miss the country, of course,' went on Audrey cheerfully ; 'but London has its charms. You must get your brother to take you in the parks and Kensington Gardens ; you must tell him that you and Zack want exercise, and then he will not refuse.'

'Mamma will walk with me,' returned Mollie disconsolately. 'She is very fond of crowded streets and shops ; she will want me to go with her, and then we shall be obliged to leave Zack at home, for fear he should be lost. Oh, I know all about it!' continued Mollie, with a sigh. 'I shall be far too tired to walk with Cyril, even if he asked me ; but he would not, because he knows mamma would be hurt : she always likes him to ask her.'

'Never mind,' replied Audrey, changing the subject abruptly. 'Remember, Mollie, we can only do our best for people, and leave all the rest.'

I am sure that in a thousand ways you will be a comfort to them. You have always been their thoughtful little housekeeper, and you can be that still. You can keep the place bright and cheery, and make it look as home-like as possible. And, Mollie, I want you to do something; but it is to be a secret between you and me, and no one—no one'—repeating the word emphatically—'is to know about it.'

And Mollie promised faithfully to hold her tongue.

'Your mother is passionately fond of flowers.' (But Audrey, in her heart, knew someone else loved them too.) 'I want you to lay out this prudently and by degrees;' and she slipped a sovereign into Mollie's hand. 'Flowers are so plentiful in London, and you can always have a nice fresh bunch for the breakfast-table. I remember your mother once saying she would go without food to buy flowers. When I think you have come to an end of the money, I shall send you some more.'

'But if anyone asks me who bought them,' asked Mollie, with one of her wide-open glances; 'what can I say then, Miss Ross?'

'Say that you have bought them with your own money—for it is your money, Mollie; and

if you would rather buy gloves with it, you are welcome to do so.'

But Mollie protested eagerly that she would far rather buy flowers.

'Cyril is so fond of them,' she added innocently, 'and I shall always take care to have a good-sized bunch on his writing-table. But what shall I do about lessons, Miss Ross?' she continued, when this point was settled. 'I am getting on so beautifully with French and music, and it will be such a pity to lose it all. I asked mamma the other evening, and she said she was sure she did not know; she might help me with my French, but she was afraid Cyril could not afford music-lessons. Besides, there would be the piano to hire; for of course I must practise. Oh dear! I don't see how I am to get on!' with another big sigh.

'I think we must leave all that for the present, dear Mollie,' replied Audrey, rather sorrowfully. 'One needs a great deal of faith when things go crooked. Keep up by yourself as well as you can, and leave the music alone for a little. By-and-by, when you think he can bear it, you might speak to your brother; but if he cannot afford it——'

Audrey stopped. Michael's generosity must

not be taxed any farther ; but she had money of her own, and nothing would please her more than to spend a little on Mollie's education. Would her father allow it ? she wondered.

‘ I think we must leave this question for the present, Mollie,’ she said, in her decided way. ‘ Make up your mind not to trouble about it for a month or two.’

And Mollie, with her usual sweet unselfishness, agreed to this.

Audrey sent her away cheered, and a good deal comforted, at receiving her dear Miss Ross's permission to write long letters.

‘ I don't mind how long they are,’ Audrey had observed, with an indulgent smile ; ‘ but you must not write too often, neither must you expect to hear from me always in return. My letters will be very few, dear Mollie, and they are only for your own eyes—remember that.’ And when Mollie had promised this with some reluctance, the gong sounded for luncheon, and Audrey was obliged to dismiss her a little hurriedly.

Audrey was surprised to find how much she missed her favourite. Mollie's lessons had occupied the greater part of her mornings, and lately this occupation had been a boon to her.

Audrey had never loved idleness, but now she loathed it; her girlish employments no longer satisfied her. She made wider margins for her activity, and schemed with an anxiety that looked like restlessness how she might fill up the day.

Perhaps her happiest hours, after Mollie left her, were spent in the Hillside nursery, playing with her baby-nephew. Geraldine noticed with secret satisfaction that her boy was becoming an engrossing interest to his young aunt.

‘I am sure he knows you, Audrey,’ she would say. ‘Look how he stretches out his dear little arms and coos to you to take him! Go to Aunt Audrey, my precious!’ and Geraldine would place him in her sister’s arms as though she loved to see them together.

Geraldine had certain fine instincts of her own. Her womanly intuition told her that nothing could be more healing than the touch of those baby fingers. When Audrey sat down opposite to her, with her nephew sprawling on her lap, and kicking up his pink toes in a baby’s aimless fashion, her face always looked happier, and a more contented look came into her eyes.

‘You are very like your mother, Leonard,’ she

would say to him ; ' but I do not believe that you will ever be as handsome.'

Baby's gurgling answer was no doubt rich with infantile wisdom, if he could only have couched it in mortal language. But, all the same, he was fulfilling his mission. Audrey felt somehow as though things must come right some day when baby gripped her finger and held it fast, or else tangled her hair. ' You are a happy woman, Gage,' she said one day ; but she was a little sorry that she made the remark when Geraldine got up quickly and kissed her, with tears in her eyes.

' You will be happy, too, some day, my darling,' she said very tenderly. But to this Audrey made no reply.

Mollie was faithful to her compact, and did not write for three whole weeks. The school had reassembled by that time, and a tall, pale young man with spectacles filled Cyril's place at table. Audrey took very little notice of him. When Michael was there, she talked to him ; but she found any conversation with the new-comer almost impossible.

' It hurts me to see him there,' she said once to her mother, and her lip quivered as she spoke. And of course her mother understood her.

‘Yes, dear, it is very hard ; your father was only saying so last night. I think he notices how silent you are at luncheon. Mr. Gisbourne is certainly not prepossessing—not like our dear Cyril ; but your father says he is an excellent fellow.’

‘I think I shall change my place at table, mother. I shall sit between you and father. That is, if you do not mind,’ she added, with ready courtesy.

‘My love, as though I should mind ! And I am sure your father will be delighted to have you. He was only speaking of you an hour ago. He thinks you are behaving so well, Audrey, and so does Percival. Percival declared that he was quite proud of you at the Charringtons’ “at home” ; that it must have been such an ordeal for you to meet all those people. A girl in your position is generally so sensitive ; but he told me that even Geraldine could not have been more dignified and at her ease.’

‘That is high praise from Percival,’ returned Audrey, smiling. ‘He thinks Gage’s manners are perfection—and so they are ; but, mother, he need not have praised me so much. The people were nothing to me—I hardly thought

of them at all. I was only remembering the last time I was there, and how Cyril was with me ; it was the saddest evening I have spent yet.'

And then she sighed and disengaged herself from her mother's embrace.

'Don't let us talk of it, mother dear ; one can bear things better if one does not speak of them. I am going to drive with Gage now, and perhaps she will keep me to dinner ;' and then she went quickly away.

After all, it was better to do something than to waste her time in complaining : it was seldom that she allowed herself to speak of her feelings even to her mother, and if she suffered a word or two to escape her, she always reproached herself afterwards for her weakness.

When Mollie's letter arrived the next day she left it unopened until she was in her own room. Michael was up in town, as usual. He rarely spent more than a few days together at Woodcote now. Audrey did not regret his absence as she would otherwise have done, because she knew he would be with Cyril.

When her father glanced at her letter she said quietly that it was from Mollie, and then he made no further observation.

But when she was in her own room she opened it somewhat eagerly. 'Dear little Mollie! I never thought I should miss her quite so much,' she thought.

Evidently Mollie had taken a long time to write that letter; it had been commenced two days after her arrival in London, and it had not been completed until now.

The first two or three pages, written in Mollie's girlish angular handwriting, were filled with plaintive lamentations over her enforced exile and separation from her dear Miss Ross; and here and there a bleared word showed touchingly where a great tear had rolled down and blotted the page; but the next entry, written a few days afterwards, showed some signs that the prospect had brightened a little. One passage gave great pleasure to Audrey:

'Mamma likes our lodgings excessively, and though I shall never love any place like our dear Gray Cottage, they are really very nice; indeed, they are better than any lodgings we have been in yet. Mamma says she never saw rooms so well furnished; the carpets and papers are rather ugly, and I cannot say much for the curtains; but there is a delicious couch—

one of those soft, springy ones that are so comfortable, rather like the one in the Woodcote drawing-room, and two delightfully easy chairs.

‘Then, in the little room we call Cyril’s study, there is really a very handsome writing-table, with one of those green reading-lamps that Dr. Ross always uses, and a nice little secretaire for papers. Mamma was so charmed when she saw that ; she told Cyril that he only wanted a few stained shelves to hold his books, and that then he would be as snug as possible. I thought Cyril looked a little queer when she said that, and when she exclaimed at the softness of the couch I saw such an odd smile on his face. I fancy he must have bought it himself, and that he does not wish mamma to know it.’ (‘Oh, you little goose!’ observed Audrey, when she came to this ; but her eyes were very bright as she went on with the letter.)

‘There were such quantities of flowers and plants about the room when we arrived, and the most beautiful tea set out on the big round table. Mamma laughed, and said Cyril was very extravagant to provide such luxuries ; but he told her he had had nothing to do with it, and he did not seem to enjoy anything.

‘I am afraid he works too hard. Mamma is beginning to say that she might as well have remained in Rutherford, for all she sees of him ; but I know she does not mean it, for she is as happy as possible.

‘Cyril never gets home until half-past six, and then we have meat-tea. His pupil comes to him at eight for two hours. I think Zack has the best of it. Cyril always takes him out for a long walk before breakfast. I should like to go with them, but I think Cyril prefers going alone. He only walks with mamma on Sunday afternoon, and then he comes in looking so tired. He often falls asleep when he sits down. I never remember his ever doing such a thing before ; but mamma says she is sure that he sleeps badly, though he will never own to it. Cyril never did like to be questioned about himself.

‘We see Captain Burnett sometimes, and Cyril says he often meets him on his way home. One day Captain Burnett asked me if I should like to see some pictures, and of course I said yes. We drove such a long way in a hansom, and I did so enjoy seeing all those beautiful pictures. Captain Burnett was kind ; he explained everything to me, and when he thought I was tired

he took me to a grand place, where we had ices and coffee.

‘He asked me a great many questions, and when I told him that I had no one to teach me now I had left my dear Miss Ross, he looked very grave. He wanted to know if mamma did not help me at all, and I was obliged to confess that the French books were still unopened ; and then he looked grave again and said, “ Poor little thing !” as though he were sorry for me.

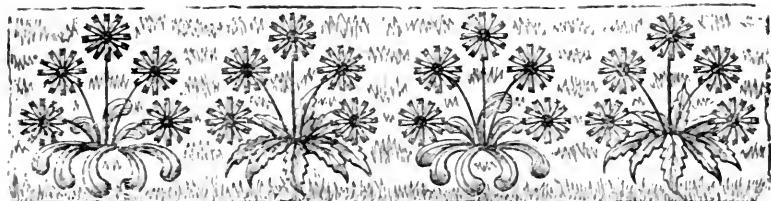
‘Well, was it not strange ?—the very next night Cyril began talking to mamma about it. He told her that now Kester was away they ought to be able to afford to give me a good education, that they were not poorer than they had been at Rutherford, and that something must be done at once.

‘Cyril spoke as though he thought mamma was to blame, and then mamma cried, as she always does if Cyril finds fault with her ; but the very next day she went out alone, and in the evening she told Cyril that she had found a very good school close by our lodgings, where they had excellent masters, and that she had arranged that I was to go there four times a week to take French, German and music lessons. I could see Cyril was pleased, though

he said very little, but by-and-by he asked me what I should do about a piano, and mamma suggested that we should hire one. Is this not nice, my dear Miss Ross, and is not Cyril a darling for thinking of everything so nicely ?

‘Ah, Mollie, I am afraid you are a sad goose!’ was Audrey’s inward ejaculation at this point, and there was a smile on her lips as she finished the letter.

Michael was fulfilling his promise nobly. Audrey knew him well enough to be sure that those meetings with Cyril were by no means accidental. ‘Whatsoever thou doest, do it with thy might,’ was a precept literally obeyed by Michael Burnett. When he held out that right hand of fellowship to his rival, there was no sense of grudging in his mind. If a cheery word or two would brighten Cyril’s day, and make his hard life a little less unendurable, Michael would speak that word at the cost of any inconvenience to himself. Audrey may be forgiven if she cherished the notion that Michael’s frequent visits to London were undertaken more for Cyril’s benefit than his own ; and if Michael could have given a somewhat different version of his motives, he kept all such interpretation to himself.



CHAPTER XI.

AUDREY RECEIVES A TELEGRAM.

‘One fourth of life is intelligible, the other three-fourths is unintelligible darkness ; and our earliest duty is to cultivate the habit of not looking round the corner.’—MARK RUTHERFORD.

‘Thou shalt lose thy life, and find it ; thou shalt boldly cast it forth ;

And then back again receiving, know it in its endless worth.’

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH.

AUDREY thought it was the longest summer term that she had ever known ; never in her life had weeks or months passed so slowly.

To all outward appearance she was well and cheerful, and spent her time much as usual—helping her mother and visiting her poor people in the morning, and in the afternoon attending cricket matches or playing tennis at the various garden-parties of the season. The nine days’ wonder about the Blakes’ sudden disappearance was over, and the Rutherford ladies no longer whispered strange tales into each other’s ears

—each more marvellous than the last. It was said and believed by more than one person that Audrey's engagement had been broken off because Dr. Ross had discovered that there was hereditary insanity in the Blake family ; indeed, one lady—a notorious gossip, and who was somewhat deaf—was understood to say that she had heard Mrs. Blake was at that moment in a private lunatic asylum.

That Audrey Ross did not take her broken engagement much to heart was the general opinion in Rutherford. Would a girl play tennis, dance, or organize picnics, they said, if she were languishing in heart-sickness?—and there was certainly no appearance of effort in the readiness with which Audrey responded to any plan that her young friends proposed. As they remarked, 'Audrey Ross was always up to fun.' But Michael Burnett could have told them a different story if they had asked him. Audrey's sweet, sound disposition made her peculiarly alive to a sense of duty.

'One must think of other people, always and under all circumstances,' she had said to him when her trouble was fresh upon her, and he knew that she was only acting up to her words.

She would play because other people wished to play, not because her heart was in it. During his brief visits to Woodcote they were always together, and more than once he told himself that he could see a great change in her. She had at times a tired, burdened look, as though weary thoughts were habitual to her. But she never spoke to him of Cyril, or questioned him in any way. He would tell her unasked about Mollie, and now and then he would drop a word casually about Cyril.

‘I met Blake the other day,’ he would say. ‘I think he looks better, though he says the hot weather tries him; he is getting on with his work, and appears to like it.’ Or another time: ‘I dined with Unwin last week; he and Blake seem to hit it off famously. Unwin says he has far more discrimination and intelligence than other young men of his age, and that for steadiness and application he might be fifty. But he thinks he ought to take more exercise; his hard work and the heat together are making him thin.’

Audrey remembered this speech of Michael’s, as, a month later on, she sat on the Whitby sands. She had yielded to Geraldine’s persuasion to accompany them to the seaside.

Dr. Ross and his wife were paying visits in Cumberland, Michael was in North Wales with an artist friend, and Audrey had accepted her sister's invitation very willingly.

Both Percival and Geraldine were very kind to her, she thought. They let her wander about alone and do as she liked, and they were always ready to plan something for her enjoyment—a drive or a sail, or a day on the moors. Audrey liked being with them, and baby Leonard was more fascinating than ever; yet it may be doubted if she would not have been happier at Rutherford. The absence of all duties, of any settled employment, tried her. A holiday, to be thoroughly enjoyed, must be attended with a disengaged mind, and with a certain freedom from worry; and this was not possible with Audrey. She would talk to her sister cheerfully, or play with Leonard, and she was an intelligent companion for Mr. Harcourt when they took long walks together; but in her moments of solitude, when she roamed alone over the yellow sands with the fresh salt wind blowing in her face, her thoughts would be sad enough as she thought of Cyril in his hot London lodgings.

‘Oh, my darling, if you could only be with

me and feel this wind!' she would think, with a great rush of pity and tenderness; 'if I could only take your place a little and bear things for you!' and the sense that she could do nothing for him would lie like a load on her heart.

'I think Audrey is getting over her trouble,' Geraldine said one day to her husband. 'Baby is doing her good; and really, when she is playing with him she seems just like her dear old self.'

'Of course she will get over it,' returned Mr. Harcourt impatiently; 'all girls do. I tell you what, Jerry: when we get back to Hillside we will have Graham down to stop with us.'

'Oh, did you mean Lionel Graham all the time?' returned Geraldine, opening her eyes very widely. 'Is he the man you always wanted for Audrey? He is nice, of course—all the Grahams are nice—but he is dreadfully ugly.'

'Nonsense, my love! Graham ugly, with that fine head of his! I tell you the girl is lucky who gets such a clever fellow. I recollect he was rather struck with her last spring. We will have him down and see if they can take to each other.'

‘But, Percy dear, you forget Audrey declares she is still engaged to Cyril Blake.’

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ replied her husband, waxing exceedingly irate at this remark. ‘I wonder at you—I do indeed!—repeating anything so ridiculous! Has not Blake given her up?—and very proper of him, too—and has not your father forbidden her to have anything more to do with him? My love, with all my respect for your judgment, I must differ from you. Audrey is not the girl to propose anything so indelicate—so altogether wanting in propriety—as to thrust herself upon a man who very properly declines to marry her. No, no; we will have Graham down. He is a first-rate fellow, and when he makes up his mind to a thing, he sticks at nothing. That’s the way to win a girl—eh, Jerry?’ And Geraldine blushed beautifully, as she recalled Percival’s bold wooing.

‘Well, do as you like,’ she said tranquilly; ‘but I don’t believe Audrey will look at him.’ And then she made signs to the nurse to bring her the baby; and Mr. Harcourt forgot his match-making schemes as he played with his son and heir.

Audrey was the only one who was glad when

the time came for them to return to Rutherford : her mother's face was a delicious sight to her ; and as she presided again at her little tea-table she gave vent to a fervent ' Oh, how glad I am to be at home again !'

' That sounds as though you have not enjoyed your holiday, Audrey ; and yet Geraldine was so pleased to have you.'

' But I have enjoyed myself, mother dear. Whitby is beautiful, and I did just what I liked, and Gage and Percival could not have been kinder or more thoughtful ; and then Leonard is such a darling !'

' You look all the better for your change ; but you are still a little thin, love,' returned her mother, scrutinizing her daughter rather narrowly. But Audrey disclaimed this charge : if she were thin, it was because Percival had taken her such long walks, she declared. But she was not thin—she was very well ; only she was tired of her idleness, and meant to work hard.

' I wish Michael were at home,' she went on. ' He has returned from Wales, but he means to stay for a week or two in South Audley Street. Kester is with him. Home is never quite the same without Michael,' she finished, looking round her as though she missed something.

Michael had really stayed up in London for Kester's sake ; but he was glad of any excuse that kept him away from Woodcote. When Kester's visit was over, he went with him to Victoria, and saw him off. He had some business in Aldersgate Street, and he thought he might as well take a Circle train, and go on. Michael always hated business in the City—the noise of the crowded thoroughfares jarred on him—and he thought he might as well get it over. He had finished his business, and was walking down Cheapside, when, to his surprise, he saw Cyril Blake coming out of a shop. Cyril seemed equally surprised at this unexpected *rencontre*.

‘I know you haunt Cromwell and Exhibition Roads,’ he said, in rather an amused tone ; ‘but I always understood you shunned the City.’

‘So I do ; but one may have business there sometimes,’ returned Michael, linking his arm in Cyril's ; for the two had grown fast friends, in spite of the disparity in their ages. ‘I suppose it would be inquisitive on my part to ask what brings you here at this time in the afternoon ?’

‘Not at all. I have only been to my tailor's,’ replied Cyril, smiling. ‘I am not a swell like

you, and City prices suit my pocket better than West-End ones. I was feeling rather dilapidated, so, as Unwin dismissed me early this afternoon, I thought I would attend to my outer man.'

'You would have been wiser to have run down to Teddington and had a pull up the river. You look as though you want fresh air, Blake. I don't know about your outer man, as you call it ; but I must say you look uncommonly seedy.'

'Do I ? Oh, I am all right,' he added hastily. 'I have not been used to spend a summer in town. How did you get on in North Wales, Burnett ? I was never there, but I hear the scenery is beautiful.'

'So it is. You should see some of Jack Cooper's sketches ; they would give an idea of the place ;' and Michael launched into an enthusiastic description of a thunderstorm he had witnessed under Snowdon. 'I took Booty to pay his devoirs at the tomb of Bethgelert. On the whole, I think Booty enjoyed his trip as much as we did.'

Michael had so much to say about his trip, that they found themselves on the platform before he had half finished. It was half-past five by this time, and a good many business

men were returning home. The station was somewhat crowded, but as they piloted their way through the knots of passengers Michael still talked on. Cyril had listened at first with interest; he was becoming much attached to his new friend, and though his masculine undemonstrativeness forbade him to say much about his feelings, his gratitude to Michael was deep and intense, and amid his own troubles he had an unselfish satisfaction in thinking that, whatever his own future might be, Kester's was safe. By-and-by his attention began to flag; he was watching an old man who stood at a little distance from them at the edge of the platform. He was a very dirty old man, and at any other time his appearance would certainly not have inspired Cyril with the wish to look at him a second time; but he was attracted by his swaying, lurching movements, which would have conveyed to any practised eye that the old reprobate was in an advanced stage of intoxication. What if he were to lose his balance and fall over the edge of the platform? The down train was momentarily expected. Cyril could bear it no longer.

‘Excuse me, Burnett,’ he said hastily; ‘that old fellow looks as though he might topple over any

minute ;' and before Michael could understand what he meant, he had dived across the platform.

The whistle of the advancing train sounded at that moment, and almost simultaneously there was a shriek of terror from some woman standing at the farther end.

'Poor wretch! he has done for himself,' Michael heard someone say. 'He went clean over.'

Michael was slightly short-sighted, and a crowd of people intercepted his view, and he could not at once make his way through them. He could not see Cyril, but the surging, excited throng all veering towards the end of the platform told him that some serious accident had occurred.

Blake must have been an eye-witness of the whole thing, he thought, as he tried to elbow his way through horrified men and hysterical women. If he could only find him! And then a very stout man in a navy's garb blocked up his passage.

'Is the poor old man killed?' Michael asked; but he feared what the answer would be. Was the gray-headed sinner summoned in this terrible manner to the bar of his offended Judge?

'Lord bless you, sir!' returned the man, 'he is

as right as possible ; the train did not touch him. It is the other poor fellow that is done for, I expect. Me and my mate have just got him out.'

A sudden horrible, almost sickening sensation of fear came to Michael.

'Oh, my God! not that, not that!' burst from his lips, as he literally fought his way down the platform. 'Let me pass, sir! I believe I know him!' he cried hoarsely, and the man in pity to his white face drew back.

There was a motionless figure lying on the bench at the other end, surrounded by porters and strangers. Michael darted towards it, but when he caught sight of the face he uttered a groan. Alas, alas! he knew it too well.

'Give me place,' he said, almost fiercely; 'that dead man is my friend.'

'He is not dead, Burnett,' observed a gentleman, who was supporting Cyril's head; 'but he is badly hurt, poor fellow! We must get him away at once.'

'Thank Heaven it is you, Abercrombie!' returned Michael excitedly; 'he is safer with you than with any man alive.'

But Dr. Abercrombie shook his head gravely.

'My carriage is outside, and is at your service,' he said; 'and for the matter of that,

so am I. Let me give these men directions how to move him.'

Then Michael stood aside while the doctor issued his commands.

Cyril had not regained full consciousness, but as Dr. Abercrombie placed himself beside him and applied remedies from time to time, a low moan now and then escaped from his lips.

Michael, who had to sit with the coachman, thought that long drive would never end, and yet Dr. Abercrombie drove good horses. It seemed hours before they reached Mortimer Street, and the strain on his nerves made him look so ghastly as he went into the house to prepare Mrs. Blake, that she uttered a shriek as soon as she saw his face.

'You have come to tell me my boy is dead!' she exclaimed, catching hold of him.

'No, he is not dead; but he is badly hurt, Abercrombie says. Let me go, Mrs. Blake; they want my help to carry him in. Is there a room ready? Mollie, look after your mother;' and Michael sped on his sad errand.

'Do not let anyone in, Burnett, while I examine him. Lock the door;' and Michael obeyed the doctor's orders, though an agonized voice outside entreated admittance.

Michael thought the doctor's examination would never end ; but by-and-by he came up to Michael and drew him aside.

‘Do you wish another opinion, Burnett?’ he asked abruptly ; ‘but it is kinder to tell you that the thing is hopeless.’

‘Good heavens, Abercrombie ! Do you mean he will not live ?’

‘Only a few hours—he is hurt internally. They were both down on the rails, you know : I saw the whole thing ; and he flung up the old man with one hand—I never saw anything so splendidly done—but the wheel of the engine caught him, and before they could stop the train the mischief was done.’

‘Will he suffer ? Can nothing be done for him ? Abercrombie, I would give half my fortune to save the life of that man.’

‘He will not suffer long,’ returned Dr. Abercrombie kindly. He was a rough, hard-featured Scotchman, but no man had a better heart, as Michael knew. ‘I will do all I can for him, Burnett, for his own sake as well as yours. I think he wants to speak to you, but he cannot talk much ; it is agony to him.’

And Michael stepped up to the bed. In the emergency he had regained his old calmness

of manner, and as Cyril's eyes were fixed on his face, he bent over him and said gently :

‘Do not speak, my dear fellow ; I know what you wish to say. I will telegraph for her at once.’

Cyril's damp, cold hand closed over his.

‘Thanks, thanks ! that is what I wanted. She would like it, and it will do no harm.’

The last few words seemed intended for a question, and Michael answered without hesitation.

‘Harm ! she would never forgive us if we did not send for her.’

Then a faint light came into Cyril's eyes.

‘I hope for her sake I shall not suffer ; but it will soon be over : I heard him say so.’ He seemed to speak with difficulty. ‘Don't look so sorry about it, Burnett ; it is much better so, and the poor old man was saved. Oh !’

That expression of pain wrung unwillingly from his lips drew the doctor to him, and he made a sign to Michael to leave them.

An hour later Audrey received the following telegram :

‘An accident. Cyril Blake badly hurt. Condition critical. Come at once. Will meet the last train at King's Cross.’



CHAPTER XII.

‘ INASMUCH.’

‘ He, being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time.’
—WISDOM OF SOLOMON.

ALL her life long Audrey never forgot that long weary journey. The lateness of the hour compelled her to take a circuitous route to London. Dr. Ross accompanied her part of the way, and did not leave her until he placed her under the care of the guard, who promised to keep the compartment for her.

‘ You will be all right now, Audrey,’ he said, with a poor attempt at cheerfulness. ‘ I have tipped the guard half a crown—a piece of extravagance on my part, I believe, as you only stop once between this and King’s Cross, and Michael will meet you at the other end. God bless you, my child!’ he continued, with deeper feeling, as the train began to move. ‘ Give

my love to Cyril, and try and trust him to his heavenly Father.'

'I will try, dear father,' was Audrey's answer.

And then she leant back on her seat and attempted to pray; but she only found herself repeating over and over again the same petition—that she might be in time; for Michael's message, so carefully worded, had read to her like Cyril's death-warrant. 'He will die,' she had said with tearless eyes to her father, as she had carried him the telegram.

It was eleven o'clock before she reached King's Cross; but before the train stopped she could see Michael standing alone under a gas-lamp, and before he discerned her she was beside him.

'Am I in time, Michael?'

Then he started, and drew her hand through his arm.

'Quite in time, dear; he has still a few hours to live.'

For he saw at once that she was prepared for the worst.

'That is well,' she replied calmly; 'let us go.'

And then Michael handed her into the hansom.

How pale she was, he thought, and how sad those dear gray eyes looked, as she turned to him and asked that question that he so dreaded to hear !

‘ We are out of the station now, and I can hear better. What was the accident, Michael ? How did it all happen ? Tell me everything, please.’

Then, as far as he was able, he told her all, and she heard him very quietly, though once he felt the shudder that passed through her when she first understood the nature of the terrible thing that had happened.

‘ Abercrombie saw it all from the first,’ he went on ; ‘ he said he never saw anything so splendidly done. Not a man in a thousand would have ventured it. What did I tell you, Audrey ?—that Blake was just the fellow to win the Victoria Cross.’

‘ He was very brave,’ she murmured ; but she trembled all over as she spoke.

‘ He was more than brave. What was my action in Zululand compared to his ? He stepped into the jaws of Death quietly, and with his eyes opened, for he must have known that two could not have been saved. He has given his noble life for a wretched worthless one. It

sounds inhuman to say it, but who would have mourned if that poor old man had been swept away? Would it not have been better if he had left him to his fate?'

'You must not say that!' returned Audrey. And now the tears were running down her face. 'It is this that makes it so noble, so Christ-like—a life laid down out of love and pity for the worthless. My brave Cyril! Who is more fit to go than he? Ah, I knew him so well; he is very reserved; he is not one to speak of religion—very few young men do; he never liked to do so; but in a simple, manly way he has tried to live it. I always knew he was good. Yes, Michael, it was better for him to give up his fresh young life than for that old man to die in his sins.'

He could not steady his voice to answer her. Would any other girl have taken it in this way? He felt there were depths in her nature that he had not fathomed yet. The nobleness of the action seemed to lift her up out of her grief. The heroic death was a fit ending to that brave life, short as it was.

There were a few minutes' silence, during which she wept quietly, and then she roused herself to ask after Mrs. Blake. A deeper

shade passed over Michael's face as she put the question.

‘Poor soul!’ he returned in a grieved voice; ‘I fear it will go very hardly with her. Abercrombie tried to say a word to her about her son's hopeless condition, but she dropped at his feet like a dead thing. I had to leave him with her, and go back to poor Blake, who was asking for his mother. I am afraid Abercrombie had to be very stern with her, for by-and-by she crept in quietly enough, and sat down beside him. When I left he was talking to her, but I do not believe that she understood a word that he said; she looks as though she has been turned to stone.’

Audrey sighed, and a moment afterwards she said a little wearily :

‘Oh, how slowly we are going! Shall we ever be there?’

Then Michael took her hand gently in his; she was so patient, so good: if only he could comfort her!

‘We have a very fast horse, and a capital driver. Yes, we shall be there soon now. Your journey must have tired you, dear. I wish someone could have come with you.’

‘Father wanted to do so, but I told him I

would rather be alone. 'Never mind about me, Michael; what does it matter if I am tired or not? If I could only be with him! but the time is passing so!' Then, as she saw the pained look on Michael's face, she said in a low voice: 'Don't be too sorry for me; it is hard—very hard—but we must only think of him;' and then she did not speak again until the hansom stopped.

Mollie was on the watch, for the door opened before they had alighted; but as she flung her arms round Audrey with a tearful welcome, the latter gently disengaged herself.

'Do not keep me, dear Mollie; let me go to him.'

'Yes, you shall go to him, dear Miss Ross; he is a little better just now; at least, he does not suffer so much. I wish mamma could speak to him, but she only sits there sighing as though her heart would break, and it must be so sad for Cyril to hear it. That is the door; you can go in;' and Audrey needed no more.

A tall, gray-haired man stood aside to let her pass, but it may be doubted whether she even saw him, any more than she noticed that rigid figure at the foot of the bed. Audrey saw nothing but that death-like face on the

pillow, and the glad light in Cyril's eyes, as she went straight to him, and, kneeling down beside him, kissed his lips.

‘My poor Cyril! My poor, dear Cyril!’ she said in a voice that was heavenly in its sweetness to him.

‘No, not poor now,’ he whispered, as he moved his head until it rested on her breast. ‘My darling, it is worth even this to see you again. If you could only know what these five months have been to me!’

He spoke in a voice so low and feeble that only she could hear him. Mrs. Blake did not move as Audrey entered; her eyes were fixed on her boy's face. They seemed the only living things about her. From time to time, even in his awful suffering, he had struggled to say a word to her, but she had scarcely answered him, though now and then a low moan issued from her lips.

‘I could not have borne it much longer,’ he went on, as in her mute sympathy Audrey rested her face against his cold, damp forehead; ‘the life was killing me. How was a man to live without hope? And I had no hope.’

‘I should always have loved you,’ she said simply.

'Yes, my own faithful one ; but even your love, precious as it was, could not have consoled me for the unnatural loneliness that was my lot. The very knowledge that you were mine and that I could never claim you seemed to add a deep bitterness to my grief. Do not let us speak of that dreary time, my darling ; it is gone now, and it is come to this : that I thank God that I lie here with only a few hours to live.'

'Oh, Cyril ! for your mother's sake, do not say this !'

'She does not hear us,' he replied ; 'she seems to take no notice of anything. Poor, dear mother ! I am sorry for her !'

'And not for me !' Audrey's unselfishness could not refrain from that low cry.

'No, not for you,' he returned tenderly. 'It is better, far better, for you, my darling, that things are ending thus. Why should you have wasted your sweet life for me, Audrey ? I could not have borne the sacrifice. In a little while I should have written to you, and begged you to give me up.'

'There would have been no use in writing such a letter.'

Then he smiled happily, as though even on

his dying bed it gave him pleasure to hear that.

‘Cyril, you must not talk; Michael says it hurts you.’

‘No, not quite so much now; somehow the pain seems easier, and it is such a relief to say all this. Does it make you unhappy, darling?’

‘Not if it gives you comfort; you may say anything—anything—to me.’

‘I only wanted to tell you that it is all right. I am glad I did it. I have not done much for Him all my life,’ dropping his voice reverently, and she knew what he meant. ‘“Inasmuch”—how does that go on, Audrey?’

Then she softly repeated the words:

‘“Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these, My brethren, ye have done it unto *Me*.”’

‘Well, He did more than that for us. What was a moment’s pain compared with His? Audrey, do you think someone could say a prayer?’

Then Audrey suggested that they should send for Michael, and he came at once.

Cyril listened with his eyes closed; but his lips moved, and Audrey’s hand was in his all the time. He seemed a little exhausted after

this, and Dr. Abercrombie gave him some restorative.

Michael did not leave the room for long after this. He came in from time to time to see if he were wanted. But there was very little for anyone to do. The flame of life was flickering to its close, and the practised eye of the physician knew that in another hour or two all would be over.

'You can go in,' he said to Mollie; 'nothing makes any difference now.'

Then Mollie crept to her brother's side.

Cyril lay very quiet; but by-and-by he roused himself to send a message to Kester. And then he spoke of his father.

'Will you give him my love?' he said. 'I wanted to see more of him. I think if I had only known him better I could have loved him.'

'I will tell him this, dear Cyril.'

'Thank you.'

And then he closed his eyes again. And as Audrey bent over him, it seemed to her as though his face were almost perfect in that stillness. Presently he asked his mother to come closer, and she at once obeyed him.

'Mother,' he said pleadingly, 'you will try to give me up?'

But she made a gesture of dissent.

‘I cannot; I cannot, Cyril! I do not believe I can live without you.’

‘You have Mollie and Kester,’ he panted, for her suppressed agitation evidently disturbed him. ‘Mother, I know what we have been to each other.’

Then she fell on her knees with a bitter cry.

‘Cyril, it is all my fault that you are lying there. Your mother has killed you. It would not have happened but for me. My boy! my boy! I cannot, I will not live, without you!’

‘Mother.’

But Michael saw he could bear no more, and at a sign from the doctor he raised the unhappy woman and led her from the room.

‘It is too much for them both,’ he said to Biddy; ‘neither of them can bear it.’

And then he saw the old woman take her mistress in her arms and cry over her like a child.

‘Biddy, I shall die too. You will bury me in my boy’s grave—my boy and me together.’

But Michael heard no more. He went back to the room just as Cyril was asking for him.

‘Burnett, will you say good-bye?’ he gasped. ‘I think it will not be long now, and I have said good-bye to Mollie. Oh! this pain,

doctor—it has come back again. Can you do anything for me ?'

But Dr. Abercrombie shook his head sorrowfully.

'Never mind, then ; it must be borne. Burnett, God bless you for all you have done ! You will be good to her, I know'—with a glance at his betrothed.

'I will,' returned Michael Burnett.

And then the two men grasped hands.

Cyril hardly spoke after this—his pain was too intense. But once Audrey saw his eyes rest on her ring. 'It is still there,' she heard him murmur. And another time he made signs that she should lay his head on her shoulder.

'I want to die so,' he whispered. And a little later he asked her to kiss him again.

He lay so quiet now that they thought he was going, and Michael knelt down by the bed and offered up the commendatory prayer. But once more the dark eyes opened : there was a strange, unearthly light in them.

'I nas much,' he said ; 'I nas much——'

His head fell back a little heavily, and the soul of Cyril Blake was with its God.

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‘He does not suffer now,’ were Audrey’s first words, as she laid him gently down and gave her last solemn kiss. When Michael put his arm round her and led her gently away, she offered no resistance.

‘I must leave you for a little while, dear,’ he said, as he stood beside her a moment; ‘but I will send Mollie to you.’

Then she begged that she might be left alone.

‘Her mother will want her; and I would rather, much rather, be alone.’

Then, when Michael had gone, she laid her head down on Cyril’s writing-table, and the tears had their way. Until now she had not thought of herself; but now it seemed to her as though the world had grown suddenly cold and dark. He had loved her—oh, how well he had loved her!—and now the Divine will had taken him from her!

But Audrey wept less for herself than for that bright young life cut off so mysteriously in its early bloom, before its youthful promise had come to maturity. But as her tears flowed, certain words she had often read recurred to her mind, and comforted her:

‘For honourable age is not that which

standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years.

‘But wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age.

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‘For his soul pleased the Lord : therefore hasted He to take him away from the wicked.’

Certainly there was no bitterness in Audrey’s grief when, a few hours later, she stood with Michael beside that still form. How beautiful her Cyril looked ! she thought ; and even Michael marvelled as he gazed at him. He lay there like a young knight who had fallen in his maiden fight, and who in death was still a conqueror. The living man who stood there could almost have envied him, he was so worn and jaded with the battle of life.

‘How peacefully he sleeps !’ he said, in a moved voice ; ‘he looks as though he were dreaming happily, Audrey. Surely it will comfort his mother to see him like this !’

‘She will not see him yet ; Biddy says she is too ill. We must give her time to recover herself—the blow has been so awfully sudden. Yes, he looks happy ; my darling sleeps well. Did you hear what he said, Michael ?—that he was glad that he lay there ; that it was all as it

should be? If ever a man yielded his life willingly, Cyril did!

‘His life was so hard, you see.’

‘Yes; but he would have given it all the same if his happiness had been perfect. He would not have stood by and seen even a beggar perish, he was so generous. You would have done it yourself, Michael.’

‘I do not know,’ he returned with a shudder; ‘I would not answer for myself: it was such an awful death!’

‘But I can answer for you,’ she replied calmly: ‘you would have done it if he had not been beforehand.’

And then she moved away from him, and began to arrange the few flowers that the people of the house had sent up to her.

Michael waited until she had finished. She was exhausted and weary, he knew, and he was anxious to take her to South Audley Street, where her mother would be awaiting them. Michael had telegraphed to her earlier in the day, and the answer had come that she was already on her way.

Audrey made an attempt to see Mrs. Blake before she left, but Biddy would not admit her.

‘It will drive my mistress crazy to see

anyone,' she said. 'She has quieted down a bit, and the doctor has given me some stuff to make her sleep; and his orders were that I was to keep her as still as possible.' And after this Audrey dared not persist.

But it grieved her to leave poor Mollie in that desolate house, the girl seemed so utterly alone; but Michael said he had spoken to the woman of the house, and that she had promised to look after her.

'We ought not to take her with us, dear Audrey,' he said gently, but firmly; 'it is her duty to stay with her mother.' And Audrey acquiesced a little reluctantly.

Mrs. Ross cried abundantly as she took Audrey in her arms; her motherly soul was filled with pity for her girl. But Audrey had no more tears to shed.

'Mother,' she said pleadingly, when, after the late evening meal, Michael had retired and left them alone together—'mother, I must wear mourning for Cyril. I hope father will not mind.'

'You shall do as you like, my love,' returned her mother sadly. 'Your father will not object to anything you wish to do. You know we all loved dear Cyril.'

‘Yes, mother; and you were always so good to him. Towards the last he mentioned you and father: “Give my love to them both.” Michael heard him say it.’

‘Geraldine is as unhappy as possible. She drove with me to the station. She begged me over and over again to say how grieved she was for you.’

‘Poor dear Gage is always so feeling!’ replied Audrey calmly. ‘Mother dear, should you mind my going to bed now? My head aches so, and I am so tired!’

Then Mrs. Ross attended her daughter to her room, and did not leave her until her weary head was on the pillow.

‘I should like to stay,’ she said, looking at her child with yearning eyes; ‘but I suppose you would rather be alone.’

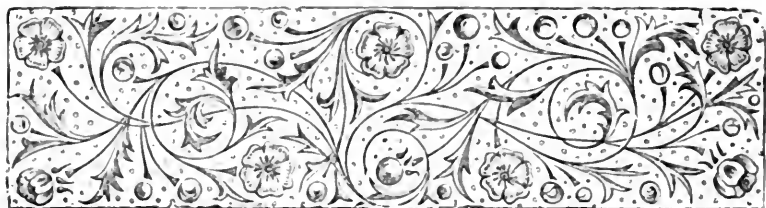
‘Yes, mother dear;’ and then she drew her mother’s face down to hers and kissed it tenderly. ‘Dearest, you are so good to me, and so is Michael.’

‘Who could help being good to you, Audrey?’

‘Yes; but you must not be too kind to me. One must not let one’s unhappiness spoil other people’s lives. I want to be as brave as he was. Will you draw up the blind, mother dear?’

It is such a beautiful moonlight night.' And, as Mrs. Ross did as she was asked, Audrey raised herself upon her elbow. 'Oh, how calm and lovely it looks! Even the housetops are transfigured and glorified. Oh, mother, it is all as it should be! Cyril said so; and he is safe in his Father's house—in his Father's and mine!' she half whispered to herself, as she sunk back on the pillow again.





CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE EXPIATION.

‘When some beloved voice that was to you
Both sound and sweetness faileth suddenly,
And silence against which you dare not cry
Aches round you like a strong disease and new,
What hope? what help? . . .

. . . Nay, none of these.

Speak, Thou availing Christ! and fill this pause.’

MRS. BROWNING.

MRS. ROSS soon discovered that Audrey wished to remain in town until the funeral was over, and she at once wrote off to her husband for the required permission.

Dr. Ross made no objection; he meant to be present himself at the funeral, and as he had some important business that would detain him another day or so in London, he suggested that they should accompany him back to Woodcote.

Audrey seemed satisfied when she had read

her father's letter. He had sent her a message that touched her greatly.

‘I hope our child will not grieve overmuch,’ he wrote. ‘Tell her that her father sympathizes with her most fully. By-and-by she will read the meaning of this painful lesson. As for poor Cyril, one can only long to change places with him. His was a short and fiery trial, but at least he was spared the burden and heat of the day. When one thinks of his blameless youth, and the manly endurance with which he met and faced his trouble, one can only be thankful that he has been taken out of a life that would have been only one long struggle and disappointment, and has entered so early into his rest.’

‘Father is right,’ murmured Audrey, as she read this. ‘Every morning I wake I thank God that he has ceased to suffer.’

Audrey went every day to see Mollie, and to spend a few minutes by Cyril's coffin. She went with Michael to Highgate to choose his last resting-place, and no other hands but hers arranged the flowers that decked the chamber of death. Mrs. Blake remained in her own room, and refused to see anyone. Biddy's account of her mistress was very unsatisfactory.

‘She does not sleep unless I give her the doctor’s soothing stuff,’ she confessed one day, when Audrey questioned her very closely, ‘and sometimes I cannot coax her to take it. “I don’t want to sleep, Biddy,” that is all her cry. “If I sleep I must wake, and the waking is too terrible.” Unless Blessed Mary and the saints help my mistress,’ continued Biddy, wiping the tears from her withered cheeks, ‘I think she will go out of her mind. She spends half the night in that room. Early this morning I missed her, and found her lying in a dead faint beside the coffin. She does not eat, and I never see her shed a tear. She sits rocking herself and moaning as though she were in pain, and then she starts up and walks the room till it turns one giddy to see her. I dare not leave her a moment. If she would only see a doctor! but, poor soul, she will do nothing now to please her old Biddy.’

‘I must see her,’ exclaimed Audrey, horrified at this description of wild, unchastened grief. ‘Biddy, will you take this note to her?’ and Biddy, nothing loath, carried off the slip of paper.

Audrey had only pencilled a few words :

‘My poor friend, let me come to you; ours

is the same sorrow. For Cyril's sake, do not refuse me.'

But Biddy came back the next moment shaking her head very sorrowfully.

'I can do nought with her,' she said hastily. 'She sends her love, Miss Ross, but she will see no one—no one. I have done the best I can for you, but I dare not anger her,' finished the old woman, moving sadly away. 'Why, she has not seen Master Kester, though he came to her door last night! We must leave her alone until she comes round to her right mind.'

'Do you think she will be at the funeral?' Michael asked more than once; but no one was able to answer this question.

But when the day came she was there, closely veiled, so that no one could see her face, and as she walked to the grave, between Kester and Mollie, her step seemed as firm as ever. Michael had written to Matthew O'Brien the particulars of his son's death, and had told him that a place would be reserved for him among the mourners; but to this there was no reply.

Just as the service began in the chapel, however, a tall man with a gray moustache

slipped into the seat behind Kester. When the sad procession filed out into the cemetery, Audrey and Michael drew back to let him pass, but he made signs for them to precede him. But at the end, as they all crowded round the open grave to take their last look at the flower-decked coffin, Mat O'Brien stood for a moment by his wife's side. Audrey said afterwards that she was sure Mrs. Blake saw him ; she started slightly, but took no further notice. The tears were streaming down Mat's face, and Mollie, with girlish sympathy, had slipped her hand through his arm ; but the mother stood in stony impassiveness beside them, until Kester whispered something to her and led her away. The rest of the mourners had dispersed, but Audrey stood there still, looking thoughtfully down into the grave. Dr. Ross and his wife had followed the others, but Michael had kept his place beside Audrey.

‘I think they are waiting for us, dear,’ he said at last, as though to rouse her.

Then she turned her face to him.

‘I like being here,’ she replied simply ; ‘and yet it is not pain to leave him lying there. Michael, I feel like Christian. Do you remember how his burden rolled off into

an open grave? Somehow, mine has rolled off, too.'

'You mean that you are happy about him.'

'Yes. It is so sweet to think that he will never suffer any more. Oh, Michael, it has been such a burden! I never seemed to have a moment's peace or comfort. Every night I used to think, "How has he passed to-day? Has it been very bad with him?" And sometimes the thought of all he was bearing seemed to weigh me to the earth.'

'And you never spoke of this to anyone—you bore all this by yourself?'

'It was no use to speak. No one could help me. It was his pain, not mine. Now it will be different. He is safe and happy, and as for me, I must try to live now for other people.'

And then, with a smile that touched him to the heart, she stepped back from the grave and told him that she was ready.

Somehow, Michael felt comforted by those few words. His intuition and knowledge of Audrey's character gave him hope that after a time she would recover her old elasticity. 'Until now,' he said to himself, 'she has so fully identified herself with him, that she has simply had no life of her own. Her sympathetic

nature has reflected only his thoughts and feelings. I doubt whether she has ever questioned herself as to her love for him; she has taken everything for granted. And now she has lost him, the thought of his happiness seems to swallow up all thought of her own grief. Such unselfishness will bring its own healing.' And in this way Michael comforted himself about her.

That evening Audrey received a message that surprised her greatly. Kester brought it. His mother would see her the next day; someone had told her that Audrey was going back to Woodcote, and she had at once expressed a wish that she should not leave without bidding her good-bye.

'Tell her that I can speak now, and that I have much to say to her.' And the strangeness of this message filled Audrey with perplexity.

Michael took her to Kensington the next day. He had to fetch Kester; the boy was going back to Brighton: there was no good in his lingering in London. His mother took no pleasure in his society; his overtures to his father had made a breach between them, and she had treated him with silent displeasure.

But he told Michael, as they drove to the

station, that she had been kinder in her manner to him that morning than she had been for months.

‘She kissed me more than once, and held my hand as though she did not like bidding me good-bye. She looks awfully ill,’ continued the boy, with a choke in his voice; ‘and when I asked her to be good to Mollie, she said quite gently that she had been a bad mother to us both; that she had not considered us enough, and that God was punishing her for it. I begged her not to say it, but she repeated it again. “You and Mollie will be better without me,” she went on. Oh, Captain Burnett! do you think she will die? I never saw anyone look quite so bad,’ persisted Kester sadly.

Biddy took Audrey up at once to her mistress’s room.

‘You will find her better,’ she said shortly; ‘the dumb spirit is cast out of her. That is the blessed saints’ doing. I knew my mistress would come to her senses—Heaven be praised for it!’

The room was somewhat dark, and it was not until Audrey was quite close to Mrs. Blake that she noticed the change in her that had so shocked Kester.

The blackness of the plain stuff gown, unrelieved by any whiteness, may have made the contrast of her pale face more striking ; but Audrey noticed that her dark hair was now streaked with gray. She had drawn it back from her face and coiled it tightly behind, as though her own appearance had ceased to interest her, and the sunken eyes and a certain sharp look about the cheekbones made her seem at least ten years older.

With a pity amounting to tenderness, Audrey would have put her arms round her ; but Mrs. Blake drew back, and only suffered her to kiss her cheek.

‘ Dear Mrs. Blake——’

But she interrupted her.

‘ Do not call me that again,’ she said hastily. ‘ There has been enough of deception and lies ; my name is Olive O’Brien. As long as I remain in the world I wish to be called by that name.’

Then Audrey gazed at her in speechless consternation. What could this strange speech portend ?

‘ Will you sit down ?’ she continued, at the same time seating herself in a high-backed chair that stood beside her bed.

A crucifix lay on a little table beside her, with a framed photograph of Cyril that she always carried about with her. From time to time she looked at them as she spoke.

‘Biddy told me that you were going back to Rutherford, and I could not let you go without bidding you good-bye.’

‘It would have made me very unhappy if you had not allowed me to see you.’

‘I cannot believe that; but of course you mean it for the truth: that is why my boy loved you, because you are so absolutely true.’ Her voice sank into a whisper, and a gloomy light came into her eyes. ‘That is why his mother disappointed him, why he lost all trust in her, because falsehood was easier to her than truth.’

‘But not now, dear Mrs. Blake; nay, I must call you by the old name. And what does it matter between us two if you have sinned? If your wrong-doing seems a heavy burden, you can at least repent.’

‘I have repented,’ she said, in a voice so strange and thrilling that Audrey felt inwardly troubled. ‘In the hours of darkness by my boy’s coffin I have humbled myself before my Maker, I have craved to expiate my sin.

Audrey, listen to me,' she continued; 'I have sent for you because you loved my Cyril, because for a few months you made him happy. He was my idol, and that is why he has been taken from me—because I forgot God and truth, and sinned for his sake.'

'Yes; but you are sorry now.'

'What does such sorrow avail, except for my own purging? In a little while the world—this cruel, hard, outer world—will know me no more. I am going back to Ireland with Mollie and Biddy, and when I have made my peace with the Church I shall enter a convent.'

'Good heavens! what can you mean?'

'I have always been at heart a Catholic,' she returned in a mechanical tone; 'but while my boy lived I was content that his Church should be mine. All my life I have had a leaning to the older faith; now in my desolation I mean to shelter in the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church. She receives all penitents; she will not refuse me.'

'But your children—Mollie: would you forsake Mollie?' pleaded Audrey, with tears in her eyes. 'Would you neglect your sacred responsibilities for duties no one would demand of a mother?'

‘Am I fit to discharge my responsibilities?’ she returned in a cold, hard voice. ‘Has anyone but Cyril ever kept me straight? Do you think Mollie and I could go living on the same old life without him? Audrey, you do not know what you say; such an existence would rob me of my reason.’

‘But what will become of Mollie?’ asked Audrey, concealing her alarm at this wild speech. ‘You must not only think of yourself.’

‘Mollie will go with me,’ she returned. ‘I shall not forsake her. The convent that I propose to enter has a home attached to it, where they educate girls belonging to the upper classes. Mollie will have plenty of companions. The nuns are kind women, and they will not coerce her in any way, and there will be sufficient for her maintenance.’

‘But when she grows up—when her education is finished: what will become of her then?’

But Mrs. Blake did not seem clear on this point. The convent had its boarders, she remarked; with the superior’s permission, Mollie might still remain there, and lead a tolerably happy life.

‘There will be other young ladies; she will

not be dull,' she went on. 'The rule is a strict one—that is why I chose it—but I should be allowed to see her sometimes; perhaps she too may turn Catholic, and then all will be well.'

But Audrey's honest nature revolted against this merciless arrangement. She saw clearly that Mrs. Blake's weak, excitable nature had been under some strong influence, though it was not until later that she heard that during the last few months she had secretly attended a Roman Catholic chapel near them. Doubtless Biddy, who was a stanch Romanist, had connived at this.

And now she had planned this strange expiation for herself, and poor Mollie must be sacrificed. What would Cyril have thought of such an unnatural arrangement? For Cyril's sake, for Mollie's, Audrey felt she must combat this notion.

'Mrs. Blake,' she said very earnestly, 'it is not for me to question your actions with regard to yourself. If you are at heart a Roman Catholic—if all these years you have been an unprofessed member of that Church—it may be as well for you to acknowledge it openly. I do not believe myself that a convent life is

free from its trials and temptations. Human nature is the same everywhere, and even sanctified human nature is liable to error. Wiser people than myself would tell you that peace of mind would be more surely attained by remaining in the path of duty. Dear Mrs. Blake, forgive me if I pain you, but would '—she hesitated a moment—' would not Cyril have disapproved of his mother taking such a step?'

'I think not,' was the response. 'My boy's eyes are purified now; he would judge differently. I shall devote the remainder of my life to praying for the repose of his soul, and in repentance for my miserable past; and it may be'—here she lifted her clasped hands, and a faint light came into her eyes—'that Heaven may release me from my misery before many years are over, and my purified soul may be allowed to find rest.'

'God grant you may find it, poor, misguided woman!' was Audrey's secret prayer; but she merely said aloud:

'We must live out our life as long as the Divine will ordains; but, Mrs. Blake, I must speak of Mollie. If you will sacrifice yourself, you have no right to sacrifice her. For Cyril's sake, let me have her!'

‘ You, Audrey !’

‘ Yes, I. Have we not been like sisters all these months ? I think Cyril would love to know she was with me ; he was so fond of Mollie. He liked to see us together. It will make me happier to have her ; when Michael is away I have no companion.’

‘ Do you really mean it ?’ asked Mrs. Blake, in an astonished voice. ‘ You are very good, Audrey, but you are not your own mistress. Dr. Ross would never consent to such an arrangement.’

‘ I have my own money. No one would be put to any expense for Mollie, unless you wished to provide for her yourself.’

‘ I should certainly wish that.’

‘ Then in that case there will be no difficulty at all. I know my father too well to fear a refusal from him. I will go back to South Audley Street and speak to him and my mother, and to-morrow you shall know their answer ; but you must promise me one thing before I go—that, if they consent, you will let me have Mollie.’

‘ She will be happier with you than in the convent,’ replied Mrs. Blake, in a musing tone. ‘ After all, it would have been a dull existence

for her, poor child !' There was a touch of motherliness in her voice as she spoke. 'Yes, you shall have her. I think my boy would have wished it.'

And Audrey's grateful kiss sealed the compact.

'But there is something else I must say,' continued Mrs. Blake, when they had talked a little more about Mollie—at least, Audrey had talked. 'I want you to give Mat a message from me.'

'Mr. O'Brien !'

'Yes, my husband. Have I not told you that I have humbled myself to the dust ? Before I leave the world I would make my peace even with him. Will you give him my message ?'

'Assuredly I will.'

'Tell him that I have repented at last, and that I would fain have his forgiveness—that I know now that I had no right to rob him of his children. If the time came over again—but no ; how can I tell whether things would have been different ? Mat would always have been Mat, and I could not alter my own nature. Oh, if I had only been good like you, Audrey !' she sighed bitterly.

‘You must not talk any more,’ observed Audrey, alarmed by the look of utter exhaustion on the wan face. ‘Shall I leave you now to rest a little?’

‘Rest!’ Audrey never forgot the tone in which the unhappy woman uttered the word. ‘How can one rest on such a pillow of thorns? No; the time is too short. I must be up and about my work. Will you bid me good-bye now? After to-day we shall not meet again. You shall write to me about Mollie; but this interview has exhausted me, and I must husband my strength.’

‘If I could only comfort you!’

The sad yearning in Audrey’s voice seemed to touch Mrs. Blake, and as the girl clung to her she pressed her to her bosom.

‘God bless you for all your goodness to him and to me! Every day I live I shall pray for you.’ Her voice broke; with a sudden impulse she kissed her again and again, then pushed her gently from her. ‘Go, go!’ she said faintly, ‘and send Biddy to me.’ And Audrey dared not linger.

But she looked quite white and shaken when she rejoined Michael; she could scarcely speak to Mollie, and she seemed relieved when her

cousin told her that his hansom was at the door. The soft autumnal breeze seemed to refresh her, and after a little while she was able to tell Michael all that had passed between her and Mrs. Blake. Michael took it very coolly; he seemed to have fully expected something of the kind.

‘Poor soul! she will always be true to herself,’ he observed. ‘It is singular how these unbalanced, pleasure-loving natures lean towards asceticism—how rapidly they pass from one extreme to another. Even her repentance is not free from selfishness. She would free herself from her maternal responsibilities, as she freed herself from her marriage vows, under the mistaken notion of expiating a sinful past; and she will labour under the delusion that such an ill-conceived sacrifice will be pleasing to the Almighty.’

‘Yes; it is a great mistake,’ she returned.

‘A very great mistake. The longer I live, Audrey, the more I marvel at the way people deceive themselves. The name of religion cloaks hidden selfishness to an extent you could hardly credit; the majority are too much engrossed in trying to save their own souls to care what becomes of other people. One would

think it was "Save yourself, and the devil take the hindmost!" when one sees so-called Christians scurrying along the narrow way, as they call it, without a thought to the brother or sister who has fallen beside them.'

'It is very grievous,' returned Audrey sadly. 'What would my poor Cyril have said to such an expiation? Michael, this interview with his mother has tried me more than anything. I think the hardest thing in life is when we see those we love turn down a wrong path, and when no entreaty will induce them to retrace their steps.'

'It is a sight one sees every day,' was Michael's reply; and then, as he saw how jaded and weary she was, he began to tell her about Kester, and after that they talked of Mollie. And when Audrey found that Michael approved of her plan, and was as anxious as she was herself that Mollie should accompany them to Woodcote, she began to discuss the subject with her old animation, and by the time the drive was over the harassed look had passed away from her face.



CHAPTER XIV.

ON MICHAEL'S BENCH.

‘What can I give thee back, O liberal
And princely giver, who hast brought the gold
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,
And laid them out the outside of the wall,
For such as I to take or leave withal,
In unexpected largesse?’

MRS. BROWNING.

DR. ROSS and his wife listened very kindly to their daughter's project. Indeed, if Audrey had expressed a wish to establish a small colony of street Arabs at the end of the Woodcote garden, Mrs. Ross would have offered no objection to the scheme. Audrey could have ruled her mother as well as ever Geraldine had ruled her; but she was too generous to exert her influence. Her mother could have refused her nothing; from morning to night her one thought was how she might console her child.

‘Mollie will be such a companion for Audrey, John!’ she suggested, when for one moment her husband had hesitated.

‘I was thinking about Matthew O’Brien,’ he replied. ‘Brail is rather too near, and people will talk; it will leak out in time that O’Brien is Mollie’s father.’

‘Will that matter?’ interposed Michael; ‘talk will not hurt anyone. I think I can answer for O’Brien: he is the last man to lay claim to his own child. His brother tells me that he is perfectly content if he sees her from time to time. Kester often writes to him, and he is never tired of reading his letters. Both Mollie and Kester have grown quite fond of him.’

‘I think it should be kept quiet, for Mollie’s sake,’ returned Dr. Ross. ‘In my judgment, Matthew O’Brien is a very unfit person to take care of a girl approaching womanhood. His brother is old, and he may outlive him. I do not wish to be hard on him, but he seems to me a very irresponsible sort of person. When Mollie is of age she will, of course, judge for herself; but until then her friends will be wise not to give her up to her father’s guardianship.’

‘He will never claim her,’ replied Michael

dryly. 'I will quote your own words : an irresponsible person is only too glad to evade responsibility. Mollie may live at Woodcote quite safely, and her visits to Brail will be taken as a matter of course. Of all people I know, the O'Briens are the least likely to chatter about their private concerns. Matthew O'Brien will be too thankful that his daughter should enjoy such privileges to wish to rob her of them.'

'Father, it will make me so happy to have her!' whispered Audrey in her father's ear.

Then the Doctor's eyes glistened with tenderness.

'It shall be as you wish, my dear,' he said very gently : 'Mollie shall come. Your mother is very fond of her, and so am I. You will have another daughter, Emmie,' he continued, looking at his wife with a kind smile. And so the matter was settled.

Poor Mollie was horrified when she heard what she had escaped. The idea of the convent was terrible to her.

'Oh, dear Miss Ross,' she exclaimed, 'how can mamma do anything so dreadful? She will be miserable—quite miserable. Of course she would not like living with only Biddy and me—she would have fretted herself ill. But to

be a nun and say prayers all day long! Poor, poor mamma!' And Mollie's eyes grew round with misery.

'Dear Mollie, your mother thinks she knows best, and no one can control her. Perhaps, if she does not like it—if the life be too hard—she will come out at the end of her novitiate.'

And this view of the case seemed to comfort Mollie a little.

'And I am really to live at Woodcote—at that dear, beautiful place?' she continued. 'Oh, Miss Ross, it seems too good to be true!'

'Yes; you are to be my little sister,' returned Audrey tranquilly. 'But, Mollie, I will not be called Miss Ross any longer. If you live with me, you must call me Audrey.'

And Mollie promised that she would.

Mollie said very little about her parting interview with her mother; but she cried bitterly for hours afterwards. 'Poor, poor mamma! Oh, what would Cyril say?' she exclaimed over and over again. And it was a long time before anyone could comfort her.

Michael went down with them to Woodcote, and remained with them for the next month or two. Cyril's sudden death had occurred the first week in October, and the trees in the

Woodcote gardens were glorious in their autumnal livery of red and golden brown, while every day careful hands swept up the fallen leaves from the shrubberies and paths. Michael resumed his old habits. When Audrey wanted him he was always ready to walk or drive with her. No one knew the effort it cost him to appear as usual, when every day his passion gained a stronger mastery over him. Dearly as he had loved her in her youthful brightness, he had never loved her as he did now, when he saw her in uncomplaining sadness fulfilling her daily duties and devoting herself to Mollie. Geraldine used to look at her with tears in her eyes. 'She is sweeter than ever. I never knew anyone so good,' she said to her husband; and Mr. Harcourt had assented to this very cordially. As for Mrs. Ross, before many weeks were over she had drawn down on her maternal head more than one reproof from her daughter.

'Mother,' Audrey said to her one day, 'have you forgotten what I once told you—that you are not to be so kind to me? You are spoiling me dreadfully. You give me my way in everything; and when I say anything that I ought not to say, you do not contradict me. I am

growing demoralized, and it is all your and Michael's fault if I get more selfish every day.'

'You selfish, my darling?'

'Yes, selfish and stupid, and as idle as possible; and yet you never scold me or ask me to do anything for you.'

'You are always doing something, Audrey; you are busy from morning till night. Michael says you work far too hard.'

'But I must work; it is my duty to work,' she returned, a little restlessly; 'and, mother, you must help, and not spoil me. When I see you and Gage looking at me with tears in your eyes, it troubles me to see them. I want you to be happy. I want everything to go on as usual, and I mean to be happy, too.'

And then she went away and gave Mollie her music-lesson, and when it was over she went in search of Michael.

Michael knew he was necessary to her—that in certain restless moods he was able to soothe her; so he stayed manfully at his post until after Christmas.

But with the new year he resumed his Bohemian life, spending two or three weeks at South Audley Street, and then running down

to Woodcote for a few days. He felt it was wiser to do so, and he could leave her more comfortably now. She was better in every way : she drooped less visibly, her smile became more frequent, and the constant society of Mollie and intercourse with her fresh girlish mind were evidently beneficial.

She would do now without him, he told himself as he went back to his lodgings, and he need no longer put such a force on himself. ' Until I can speak, until the time has come for me to open my heart to her, it is better that we should be apart.'

That Audrey held a different opinion was evident, and she could not always conceal her disappointment when Michael's brief visits became briefer and more infrequent.

' It is all that troublesome money,' she said once, when one spring morning he stood waiting for the dogcart to take him to the station. ' Of course, Woodcote does not content you now. You want a house of your own, and to be your own master. Well, it is perfectly natural,' she added quickly.

' I have always been my own master,' he returned quietly ; ' and as for the house you are so fond of talking about, it seems still in the

clouds as far as I am concerned. Neither have I once visited Wardour Street.'

'No ; you have been very slow about it,' she replied, smiling ; 'you were never in a hurry to possess your good things, Michael. I have often envied you your patience.'

And then the mare trotted round the corner.

'There is an old saying, that "all comes round to him who waits." Do you think that is true, Audrey ?'

He did not wait for her answer, as he climbed up into the driving-seat and took the reins ; then he lifted his hat to her with rather a sad smile.

'Yes, I have waited a long time, and it will not come yet.' And then he touched the mare a little smartly, and the next moment she was trotting briskly towards the gate.

'Why had he looked so sad ?' she wondered, as she went back to Mollie. He had not seemed like himself all the week, and now he had gone. 'If he only knew how much I want him, I think he would not go away so often,' she said to herself as she sat down to correct Mollie's French exercise.

It was in the early days of June that Michael paid one of these flying visits to Rutherford,

and as he drove through the green lanes, with the sweet summer breeze just stirring the leaves, he suddenly remembered that Cyril had lain in his quiet grave just eight months. He hardly knew why the thought had occurred to him, for he had been pondering a far different subject. 'Eight months! I had no idea that it had been so long,' he said to himself; 'time passes more quickly as one grows older. If I live to the end of the year I shall be nine-and-thirty. No wonder I feel a sober middle-aged man!'

These reflections were hardly exhilarating, and he was glad when Woodcote was in sight.

'You need not drive in, Fenton,' he said to the groom; 'take the mare round to the stables, and I will walk up to the house.'

The gardens of Woodcote looked lovelier than ever this afternoon, he thought, as he walked slowly up the terrace: the tender green of the foliage, the gay tints of lilacs and laburnums and pink and white horse chestnuts, made a gorgeous background. Here a guelder rose thrust its soft puffy balls almost in his face, while the white shimmering leaves of the maple contrasted superbly with the dark-veined leaves of the copper beech. Dr. Ross had always prided himself on his rare trees and shrubs, and,

indeed, no other garden in Rutherford could compete with the grounds of Woodcote; the long lawn that stretched below the terrace was kept free from daisies, and was as smooth as velvet.

Some lads were playing tennis there now, and a young lady in a gray dress was sitting under a clump of lilacs, watching them. For a moment Michael hesitated, thinking it was a stranger; but as she beckoned to him, a sudden gleam came into his eyes, and he hastily crossed the lawn.

‘I have been waiting for you; you are a little late, Michael,’ she said, as he shook hands with her. ‘Mollie has gone out with mother; I asked her to take my place.’

But he stood looking at her, and there was a strangely pleased expression on his face.

‘I did not know you,’ he said, in a low voice; ‘I thought it was a strange young lady sitting on the bench. It was this, I suppose;’ and he touched her gown as he spoke.

Audrey coloured. The remark evidently pained her.

‘I left off my black gown yesterday,’ she replied hurriedly. ‘I found out that it troubled father, though he was too kind to tell me so. It

was Gage who spoke to me ; she said that it was a pity to wear it so long.'

'I don't see that Gage had any right to speak to you. It was your affair, not hers.'

There was a trace of sharpness in Michael's tone, and the light had faded out of his eyes. After all, there was no cause for him to rejoice ; she had not left off her mourning of her own accord. What a fool he had been ! Of course, she had only done it to please her father.

'No ; it was kind of her to speak ; and, after all, what does it matter ? Father seemed so relieved when I put on this, and I can remember Cyril without the help of a black gown. It is better to please other people than to please one's self, and after the first moment I did not mind. Those boys are so noisy,' she continued in her ordinary manner, as though she were not willing to discuss the subject more fully. 'Shall we go to "Michael's bench" ? Booty is making for that direction, as usual, and the pond is so pretty this afternoon.'

'As you like,' he returned, a little moodily.

Strange to say, this little episode of the dress had upset his equanimity, and he could not at once regain his old calmness. Had ever any gown become her so well ? he wondered, with

the exaggeration natural to a lover. She had a spray of laburnum in her hand, and the sunshine seemed to thread her brown hair with gold. It seemed to him as though there was a softer look in her gray eyes, as though his return were very welcome to her.

‘Michael,’ she said suddenly, as they stood watching Eiderdown and Snowflake as they came sailing proudly up the pond in all the majesty of unruffled feathers, and Booty, as usual, pattered to the water’s edge to bark at them until he was hoarse, ‘what is this that I hear about your going away? Father tells me that you have made all sorts of plans for yourself.’

‘My money is burning a hole in my purse, you see,’ he returned, picking up a dry twig from the ground, a proceeding that seemed to drive Booty frantic with excitement. ‘I am beginning to realize my responsibility as a man of property ; and as, of course, my first duty is to look after number one——’

But she would not allow him to finish.

‘Michael, will you come and sit down? How can we talk properly while you are picking up sticks for Booty?’

Then he followed her to the bench, but,

instead of seating himself, he leaned lazily against a baby-willow.

‘I am going abroad with Dick Abercrombie,’ he said, as though he were mentioning an everyday occurrence. ‘You know how often I have planned a tour in Switzerland and Italy, but I have never been able to carry it out ; and now I can combine duty and pleasure.’

‘Where does the duty lie, Michael?’

But she did not smile as she put the question, and it struck him that she looked a little dull.

‘Why, with Dick, of course,’ he returned quickly. ‘Don’t you know, the poor fellow is terribly out of health ; his father is very anxious about him. He has been over-working, and I fancy there is some sort of love-affair as well ; at least, the Doctor hinted as much. Anyhow, he is to strike work for six months ; and as he wanted a travelling companion, I offered my humble services.’

‘But you will not be away all that time?’ she asked, with visible anxiety.

‘Six months is not so very long is it?’ he returned coolly ; ‘and I do not see how we shall work out our plans even in that time. We are to do Switzerland thoroughly and to spend at least a month in the Engadine ; then

there are the Swiss Tyrol and the Italian lakes, and afterwards Rome, Florence, Venice, and Naples. If Dick tires of it and throws it up, I can still keep on alone. I want to do the thing properly for once in my life, and I have even thought of Greece and the Holy Land the following spring.'

But again she interrupted him, and this time he saw the pained look in her eyes.

'You will leave us for all that time—you will let him come back alone, and go on by yourself? Oh, Michael! what shall I do without you? You are more necessary to me than ever now.'

She so seldom thought of herself that this speech took him by surprise. There was a tone of reproach in her voice, as though she thought him unkind for leaving her. Michael was not his ordinary calm self that afternoon. For months he had dreaded to find himself alone with her; but now the very sweetness of that loving reproach seemed too much for him.

'A man is not always master of himself,' Cyril had once said; and at that moment Michael felt that it was no longer possible for him to be silent. He could bear it no more.

'I shall stay away,' he said in a strangely suppressed voice, 'because it is only right

for me to do so—because it is my duty to leave you.'

'Your duty to leave me,' she faltered. 'Oh, Michael, why?'

'Do you wish me to tell you?' he said, looking at her fully as he stood opposite to her; and there was a gleam in the keen blue eyes that made her suddenly avert her face. 'Is it possible that all these years you have not known what you have been to me—that you have not guessed my love?'

Then for the first time in her life she shrank from him.

'What do you mean?' she said helplessly. 'We have always loved each other; you have been like my own brother, Michael.'

'Then I can be your brother no longer,' he returned passionately; 'from a child you have been far dearer to me. I never remember the time since I was a subaltern that I did not love you, and my love has grown every year.'

'Do you mean that you cared for me as Cyril cared?'

But even as she asked the question he saw that her face was suffused with a burning blush.

'I do mean it! From a child you have been

the one woman in the world to me—the only one I wished to make my wife.’

Then she covered her face with her hands, and he could see that she was trembling from head to foot.

‘It is too soon,’ he heard her say; ‘it is terribly soon;’ and he knew the shock of this discovery was very great.

‘It is not too soon,’ he said, sitting down beside her and trying to draw away her hands. ‘Audrey, my dearest, I cannot bear this. You must not shrink from me so. Do not misunderstand me; I am asking you for nothing. Surely you are not afraid of me—of Michael?’

‘I think I am afraid of you,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, Michael, if this be true! But I cannot—cannot believe it! Why have you never told me this before? Why have you let me——’

And then she stopped, as though a sob impeded her utterance.

‘I was never in a position to tell you so,’ he returned, with his old gentleness. ‘For years I doubted whether I should ever be well enough to marry. Do you think I would have condemned my wife, even if I could have won her, to a life of nursing? I was far too proud

to demand such a sacrifice of any woman. And then I was a poor man, Audrey.'

'What did that matter?' she replied, with a touch of scorn in her voice; 'Cyril was poor too.'

'You must not think I blame him, if I say we were very different men. I was prouder than he, and I knew your generous nature too well to take advantage of it. When the money came it was too late: you were engaged to him. I had only to hide my pain, so that you should not be made unhappy by it. I thought I was a bad actor; but you never guessed my secret—you would not have guessed it now.'

'How could I?' she returned simply; 'I was only thinking of Cyril.'

'Yes, and you are thinking of him now; he is as much my rival now he is dead as when he was living. That is why I am going away, because I can bear it no longer.'

'Must you go?'

Audrey's voice sank so that he could hardly hear the faint words. Perhaps she herself did not know what they implied; she was too shaken and miserable. That Michael, her own dear Michael, should have suffered all these years, and that she had never known it! Cyril

was in his grave—he no longer needed her—what did it matter if the idea of another man wooing her so soon gave her pain, if she could only comfort Michael? But happily for them both, Michael guessed at that secret thought, and as he caught the words the flush mounted to his brow.'

'Yes, I must go,' he said firmly; 'it is my best, my only chance. In my absence you will think of me more kindly. The old Michael—who was your friend, your faithful, devoted friend—will unconsciously blend with the new Michael, who you know is your lover. There,' he continued in a pained voice, 'as I speak the word you shrink again from me; and yet I am asking you nothing, dear. If you were to promise me this moment that you would be my wife, if you were to tell me that you would try to love me as I wish to be loved, I would not marry you! No—though you are dearer to me than anything in life—I would not marry you!'

'Do you not wish me to try, then?' she asked, rather bewildered by this strange wooing.

Was it because Cyril was young that she had never feared him as she feared Michael?

There was a quiet power about him that, in spite of his gentleness, seemed to subdue her, and though he was very pale, there was a fire in his eyes that made her unwilling to look at him. Yes, it was indeed a new Michael—one she could hardly understand.

‘Certainly I do not wish it,’ he replied quickly. ‘Can love come by trying?’ But she could not answer him this. ‘Any such love would not content me,’ he went on; ‘I must have all your heart or none. Forgive me if I say one thing, Audrey. I believe that poor Blake had not all that you have to give. I have thought this more than once; his love for you was so great that yours could hardly equal it. Nay, dear, I did not mean to hurt you by saying this,’ for she was weeping now. ‘You were goodness itself to him.’

‘I loved him; I am sure I loved him,’ she said a little piteously, for Michael’s words seemed to touch a sore spot.

How often since Cyril’s death had she blamed herself for not loving him more! More than once his excessive tenderness had wearied her, and she would have been content with less. She had been in no hurry to shorten her engagement, and the thought of resigning

her maidenly freedom had always been distasteful to her. Could it be possible that Michael was right, and that there was something defective in her love?

‘Yes, you loved him. Blake has often told me that you were an angel of goodness to him. He missed nothing, you may be sure of that; but, Audrey, I cannot help my nature. I should ask more than ever he did.’

Then her head drooped, and he knew that no answer was possible.

‘So you know why I am going away.’ And now he rose and again stood before her. ‘Because under these circumstances it would no longer be possible for us to be together—at least, it would not be possible for me. I shall leave you to question your own heart. Let it speak truly. Perhaps—I do not say it will be so, but perhaps you may find that I am more to you than you think. If that time ever comes, will you send for me?’

‘Send for you?’

‘Yes; be true to your own noble self, your own honest nature, and be true to me. You need not say many words. Just “Michael, come,” will be enough to bring me from the very ends of the earth.’

‘But you will come before that ; you will not wait for any such words ?’

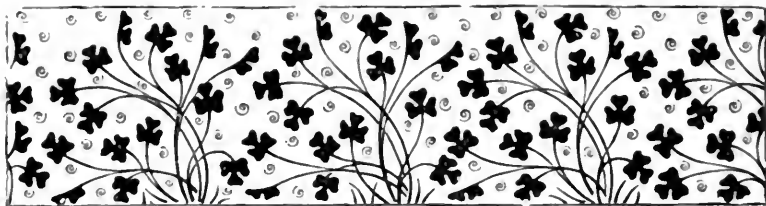
But though he gave no special answer to this, she saw by his face that he would wait.

‘But you will write, Michael ? you will not leave me’—and then she hastily substituted ‘us’—‘in complete silence ? You may be away six months—a whole year—it may even be longer.’

‘Yes, it may be longer,’ he returned ; and now it was he who was the calmer of the two. ‘It is impossible for either of us to tell now how long my exile may last ; but I will write—not often, and perhaps I may not even speak of this that has passed between us ; but I shall write, and you will find no difficulty in answering my letters.’

And when he had said this he looked at her very kindly, and then without another word walked to the house.





CHAPTER XV.

‘LET YOUR HEART PLEAD FOR ME.’

‘We were apart ; yet day by day
I bade my heart more constant be.
I bade it keep the world away,
And grow a home for only thee ;
Nor fear’d but thy love likewise grew,
Like mine, each day, more tried, more true.’

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

AUDREY never knew how she got through the rest of the day. During the remainder of Michael’s visit she seemed in an uneasy dream. Never before in her life had she been oppressed by such painful self-consciousness ; all freedom of speech was impossible to her ; she spoke with reluctance, and felt as though every word were weighed in some inward balance.

More than once her mother asked her if she were well ; but, happily, Michael was not present to see how the blood rushed to her face as she

framed an evasive answer. She could not have told her mother whether she were ill or well : she only knew some moral earthquake had shattered her old illusions, and that she was looking out at a changed world.

But she was conscious through it all that Michael's watchfulness and care shielded her from observation, that he was for ever throwing himself into the breach when any unusual effort was required. Once when her sister and Mr. Harcourt were present, he challenged them to a game of whist, that Audrey might leave her place at the piano. Very likely he had heard the slight quaver in her voice that told him the song tried her.

Audrey longed to thank him as she stole out into the summer dusk, and wandered down the paths between the tall sentinel lilies, that gleamed so ghastly white in the darkness. But with all his thought for her, he was never alone with her for a moment until the last day came, and he went to the morning-room to wish her good-bye. She was tending her ferns, but she took off her gardening-gloves at once as he came up to her.

'You are going, Michael ; but we shall see you again before you really start ?' she said,

with an attempt at cheerfulness. But he shook his head.

‘I think not. Abercrombie has just written to say that Dick wants to get away a week earlier. I shall not be down here again.’

Something choking seemed to rise in Audrey’s throat, and if her life had depended on it she could not have got out another word. But Michael saw the troubled look in her eyes; they seemed to ask him again that question, ‘Must you go?’

‘Yes, dear; I must go,’ he replied gently. ‘It is better for us both—better for you, and far, far better for me.’ And as she still looked at him without speaking, he drew her towards him and kissed her cheek. ‘God be with you, my dearest!’ he said very tenderly. ‘Think of me as kindly as you can, and let your heart plead for me.’

And the next moment he was gone.

Audrey stood rooted to the spot; she felt as though some nightmare oppression were on her. She heard her father’s voice calling to her. ‘Where is Audrey?’ he said. ‘She must bid Michael good-bye.’ And then someone—Michael, perhaps—answered him.

A great longing was on her to see him

again; but as she hesitated the wheels of the dogcart sounded on the gravel, and she knew that she was too late. With a sudden impulse she leant out of the window. Michael was looking back at the house; he saw her, and raised his hat. She had just time to wave her hand as Dr. Ross drove rapidly through the gate.

When her mother came to find her she was still standing there; she looked very pale, and the pained, wistful look was still in her eyes.

'Mother,' she said, 'Cyril has left me, and now Michael has gone, too; and the world seems a different place to me.'

'Michael will come back, my darling,' replied Mrs. Ross, vaguely troubled by the look on the girl's face. 'Your father says he has long wanted a thorough change, and this trip will do him so much good.'

'Yes, he will come back; but when and how? And he will not come back for a long time;' and then she broke down, and hid her face in her mother's shoulder. 'If I were only like you, mother! if my life lay behind me, and had not to be lived out day by day and year by year! for I seem so tired of everything.'

Mrs. Ross could make nothing of her girl ; but she gave her just what she required that moment, a little soothing and extra petting.

‘ You have gone through so much, and you have borne it all so quietly, and now Nature is having her revenge ; you will be better presently, my darling.’

And she was right : Audrey’s strong will and sense of duty soon overcame the hysterical emotion.

‘ I think I am tired,’ she acknowledged ; and to her mother’s relief she consented to lie still and do nothing. ‘ I will make up for this idle day to-morrow,’ she said with a faint smile, as she closed her eyes. ‘ Now go downstairs, mother dear, and don’t trouble about me any more, unless you want to make me ashamed of myself for having been such a baby.’

‘ She is just worn out with keeping everything to herself, and trying to spare us pain,’ Mrs. Ross said to her husband, as she recounted this little scene to him. ‘ I never knew Audrey hysterical before ; I was obliged to give her some sal volatile. I think she is asleep now.’

‘ I don’t hold with sal volatile,’ returned the Doctor a little grimly. ‘ Sleep is a far safer

remedy, Emmie. Leave her to herself; she will be all right in a day or two.'

But Dr. Ross sighed as he got up and went to his study. Audrey little knew that her father was in the secret; that in his pain and perplexity Michael had at last taken his best friend into his confidence.

'We must leave things to work round,' had been his parting words to Michael that morning. 'No one, not even her father, must coerce her. All these years you have been like a son to me, Mike; and if my child could bring herself to love you as you deserve to be loved, no one would be better pleased than I should be.'

'And you will tell no one—not even cousin Emmeline?'

'Why, I should not dare tell her,' returned the Doctor with rather a dejected smile, for he hated to keep things from his wife. 'Geraldine would get hold of it, and then it would come round to Harcourt. No, I will keep my own counsel, Mike. And now good-bye, and good luck to you!'

'It is the Burnett motto,' replied Michael, with a touch of solemnity in his voice—'“Good luck God send.” Take care of her, Cousin John.'

And then the two men grasped hands and parted.

‘If I had to search the whole world over for a husband for her, I’d choose Mike,’ was Dr. Ross’s thought as he drove himself back again to Woodcote.

Audrey kept her promise and made up for her one idle day. ‘Work was good for every one,’ she said, ‘and it was especially good for her.’ So the following morning she resumed lessons with Mollie. She had complained a few weeks before that her German was becoming rusty, and by her father’s advice she and Mollie were taking lessons together of Herr Freiligrath. The master she had selected was a very strict one, and his lessons entailed a great deal of preparation. No discipline could have been more wholesome. Audrey forgot her perplexities while she translated *Wallenstein* and followed the unhappy fortunes of Max and Theckla.

But she did not at once regain her cheerfulness, and the daily round of duty was not performed without a great deal of effort and inward prompting; if no task were left unfulfilled, if she were always ready to give her mother or Geraldine the companionship they needed, and

if her father never missed one of her usual ministrations, it was because she would listen to no plea of self-indulgence.

'You are unhappy, and I fear you must be unhappy and not at ease for a long time,' she would say to herself in the intervals of her work; 'but idleness will not help you.' And to give her her due, she was never busier than during the summer that followed Michael's leave-taking. She had no idea that Michael knew all she was doing, and that her father often wrote to him. Michael had kept his word, and his letters to Audrey were very few and far between, and there was not a word in them that her mother or Geraldine could not have read if she had chosen to show them; but Michael's letters had always been sacred to her. Still it was impossible to answer them with her old freedom. The happy, sisterly intercourse was now a thing of the past. She could no longer pour out to her friend all her innocent girlish thoughts; a barrier—a strange, unnatural barrier—had been built up between them, and Audrey's letters, with all her painstaking effort, gave very little pleasure to Michael.

'Poor child! she is still afraid of me,' he

thought, as he folded up the thin paper. And he could not always suppress a sigh as he missed the old playfulness and open-hearted affection that used to breathe in every carelessly worded sentence. But he knew that she could not help herself; that it was impossible for her now to tell him how she missed him, and how heavily the days passed without him; and how could he know it, if she thought less of Cyril and more of him every day?

Michael could not guess at all that inward self-questioning that seemed for ever making dumb utterance in her breast. Now and then, when no one needed her, she would wander down to 'Michael's bench' in the dusk or moonlight, and go over that strange conversation again.

'Let your own heart plead for me,' had been his parting words; and, indeed, it seemed as though some subtle influence were for ever bringing his words to her memory. Why had he left her? Could he not have trusted her to do even this for him? She had loved Cyril, but she had not wished to marry him; she had wished to marry no man. It was the instinct of her nature to make others happy, and not to think of herself; and if Michael had wanted

her—— But the next moment a sort of despair seized her.

He was not like Cyril. What she had to give would not content him in the least.

'I must have all your heart or none,' he had said to her; and his eyes seemed to dominate her as he spoke. 'I should ask more than he did.' And she had not dared to answer him.

No; she could not deceive him. She knew that no kindness on her part would ever wear in his eyes the semblance of the love he wanted. What could she do for him or for herself?

'Can love come by trying?' he had asked; and she could recall vividly the bitterness of his tone as he said this.

But the speech over which she pondered most, sometimes for an hour together, was a very different one.

'I shall leave you,' he had told her, and there had been a strange light in his eyes as he spoke—'I shall leave you to question your own heart. Let it speak truly. Perhaps—I do not say it will be so, but perhaps you may find that I am more to you than you think. If that time ever comes, will you send for me?'

'What did he mean by saying this?' she would ask herself. 'Why did his look seem to

reproach me and pierce me to the heart? How could I know, unless he told me? It is not my fault that I have been so blind. I cannot send for him—I cannot! It is too soon, and——’

But Audrey did not finish her sentence. Even under the dark trees the hot flush was scorching her face.

‘Oh, I am so tired of it all!’ she would say, springing to her feet with a sudden, quick impatience.

The old tranquil life—the happy, careless life—was gone for ever. Cyril—her poor dear Cyril—was in his grave; and now there was this new lover, with his proud, gentle wooing: not her old Michael who had so satisfied her, but a new, powerful Michael, who half drew and half repelled her, and for whom she had no fitting answer.

Audrey was glad when August came and she could find some relief in change of scene. Dr. Ross had taken a large roomy cottage at Keswick for the summer holidays, and the Harcourts and Kester were to join them. Audrey was thankful that her father had not selected Scotland, as his son-in-law had suggested; and she made up her mind, in her sensible way, that, as far as lay in her power,

she would enjoy herself as much as possible ; and after a time her efforts were not unsuccessful.

Derwent-water was in unusual beauty that year, and a spell of warm, sunny weather enabled them to enjoy their boating expeditions on the lake. Audrey liked to paddle herself and Mollie to one of the islands, and sit there reading and working, while Kester and Percival fished and Geraldine roamed by the lake-side with her bonnie boy, sitting like a young prince in his little wheeled carriage, beside her. There was a long-tailed, shaggy pony belonging to the cottage—a sturdy, sure-footed, good-tempered animal, and Dr. Ross would often drive his wife through some of the lovely dales. Mrs. Ross never thoroughly enjoyed herself in a boat—she had a dislike to find herself surrounded by the deep, clear water ; and she much preferred the chaise and Jemmy.

‘You were always a goose, Emmie, and I suppose that is why I married you,’ Dr. Ross remarked, as he tickled up Jemmy’s broad back with the whip.

Nevertheless, the Doctor loved these expeditions quite as much as his wife did.

‘What a handsome Darby and Joan they look, Jerry!’ Mr. Harcourt once said, as he

walked beside her, with Leonard proudly seated on his shoulder. 'I doubt if we shall make such a good-looking couple, my love, in thirty years' time.'

But Mr. Harcourt was smiling in a sly fashion, as he took a sidelong glance at his graceful wife. Geraldine was looking lovelier than ever in the broad-brimmed hat that her husband had chosen for her.

A sad event happened soon after their return to Woodcote. Matthew O'Brien died on the anniversary of his son's death. His end had been very sudden; no one had suspected that for months an insidious disease had been making stealthy progress. He had seemed much as usual, and had made no complaint, only Mrs. Baxter had remarked to her father that Uncle Mat seemed quieter-like and more peaceable. 'He has given up those wearisome prowls of his, and takes more kindly to the chimney-corner,' as she said.

But one evening Mat put his pipe down silently before it was half smoked, and went off to bed, and the next day he complained of pain and drowsiness; and Prissy cooked some of her messes and soothing possets, and made much of him as he lay on his pillow looking idly out on

the October sunshine. And the next day, as the pain and drowsiness did not diminish, she very wisely suggested that a doctor should be sent for ; and as Dr. Foster stood beside him, asking him questions rather gravely, a sudden thought came into Mat's mind, and he looked into the doctor's eyes a little solemnly.

'You need not be afraid to tell me, doctor,' he said sadly ; 'my life has not been much good to me, and I shall not be sorry to part with it.' But the doctor's answer was kindly evasive.

But two or three nights afterwards, as Thomas O'Brien was sitting beside the bed for an hour to relieve Prissy, Mat stretched out his lean arm and grasped his brother's coat-sleeve.

'It is coming, Tom,' he said ; 'I shall soon be with my boy—that is, if God's mercy will grant me admittance to that good place. Give my love to Mollie and the little chap, and, Tom, old fellow, God bless you !'

He murmured something drowsily, and then again more clearly :

'Tell Olive that she was not to blame so much, after all. I have been too hard on her, poor girl ! but she could not help her nature. Isn't there something about " To whoever little

is forgiven, the same loveth little"? I seem to remember Susie reading it.'

And Thomas O'Brien, bending over the gray face, repeated the words slowly :

' "Wherefore I say unto you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loveth much." '

But Mat interrupted him :

' He has forgiven me plenty, lad, and you too, and I love Him for it.'

And those were Matthew O'Brien's last words.

Mat O'Brien did not go unwept to his grave, in spite of his unsatisfactory life. His brother mourned for him long and sincerely, and in their way Kester and Mollie grieved, too. At Audrey's wish, Mollie wrote the full particulars of her father's death to the convent. Sister Monica's answer was, in Audrey's opinion, singularly suggestive of the *ci-devant* Mrs. Blake. It was a strange medley of mysticism and motherly yearnings, but at the end was a touch of real honest feeling.

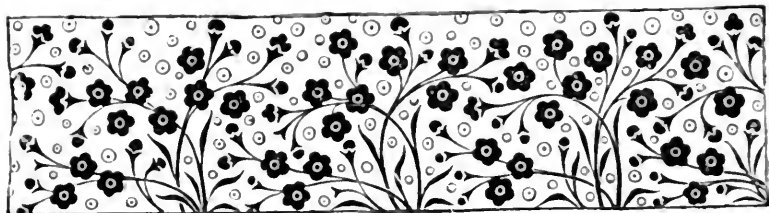
' Tell Audrey that when I pray for my boy I pray for her, too; and, Mollie, do not think that your mother forgets you, for perhaps she may do you better service now than ever she did when we were together. Think of me sometimes, my child. I am glad that your

father spoke of me so kindly. I can pray for him now, as I never could when he was living. Poor man ! It was an ill world to him, but he is out of it now.

‘ Your loving and repentant mother,
‘ SISTER MONICA MARY.’

Audrey went over to Brail constantly during the autumn and winter months that followed Mat's death. Sometimes Mollie accompanied her, but oftener she was alone. Nothing cheered Thomas O'Brien more than the society of his favourite. He loved to talk to her of the dear ones who had passed within the veil, and to Audrey herself the visits were very soothing.

She liked those solitary walks under the gray November skies, or when the December sun hung redly behind the distant hedgerows. How often she had walked there when Cyril had met her half-way, or she had come upon him lingering in the lanes, with Zack bounding beside him. It was in the Brail lanes that he had first told her of his love, when she had sent him sorrowfully away from her ; but somehow, as she walked there now, between hedgerows white with hoar frost, she thought less of him than of Michael ; but as yet no message had been sent to recall the wanderer home.



CHAPTER XVI.

BOOTY'S MASTER.

‘ And she to him will reach her hand,
And gazing in his eyes will stand,
And know her friend and weep for glee,
And cry, “ Long, long, I’ve looked for thee.” ’

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

KESTER had spent his Christmas holidays at Woodcote ; Audrey loved to have him with her. Somehow he seemed to belong to Michael, and the boy warmly returned her affection.

‘ Do you know that Mr. Abercrombie is coming home in March ? ’ he said to her the day before he went back to Brighton ; ‘ he is quite well now, and Captain Burnett says he is in a fever to get back to England. Do you think Captain Burnett will come, too ? ’ and Kester looked anxiously in her face.

Audrey could not satisfy Kester on this point; nevertheless, she felt a secret hope stirring in her heart that Michael would not stay away much longer. After all, was it likely that he would wait for the message when he must know how impossible it would be for her to send it? He had been away seven months, and by this time he must be growing homesick.

Almost the same thought occurred to Michael as, early in March, he sat in the loggia of an old Florentine palace, where he and his friend had a suite of rooms.

How long had he been away, he wondered, as he looked out on the sunset—seven, nay, eight months; and as yet there had been no recall. Had he really expected it? Would it not be as well to go back and plead his own cause, and see what these months of absence had done for him, or should he wait a little longer?

Michael's self-imposed exile had not been unhappy. His companion was congenial to him; the varied scenes through which he had passed, the historic interest of the cities, had engrossed and interested him; and, perhaps for the first time, he tasted the delights of a

well-filled purse, as he accumulated art treasures and pictures ; but, above all, a latent hope, to which he gave no voice or title, kept him patient and cheerful.

‘ It was too soon ; but by-and-by she will find it out for herself,’ he would say, as he strolled through the galleries, or stood by some moss-grown fountain to buy flowers from a dark-eyed Florentine girl.

Should he go back with Abercrombie next week, or should he push on towards Greece and the Holy Land ? It was a little difficult to decide, but somehow Michael never answered that question. Fate took the matter into her own hands, as she often does when the knot becomes too intricate for the bungling fingers of poor mortals.

Somehow Audrey became convinced in her own mind that Michael would certainly accompany his friend back to England. They had started together ; was it likely that Michael would allow him to return alone ? and when March came she began to look anxiously for a letter announcing this intention.

She was thinking of this one afternoon as she sat talking to her mother. It was a cold, dreary day, and Audrey had just remarked that

no one in Rutherford would think of leaving their fireside on such an afternoon, when Geraldine entered, glowing from the cold wind, and looking cosy and comfortable in her warm furs.

‘My dear, what a day to venture out,’ remonstrated her mother; ‘even Audrey says the wind is cruel.’

‘I am not such a foe to the east wind as Michael is,’ returned Geraldine cheerfully, as she seated herself out of the range of the fire; ‘and Percival never likes me to cosset myself—that is why I never take cold. By-the-bye, I heard something about Michael a little while ago. Just as I was talking to Mrs. Charrington, who should come in but Dora Abercrombie! You know Dora, Audrey. She is the second one; but she is not half so good-looking as Gwendoline.’

‘She is related to Mrs. Charrington, is she not, Gage?’

‘Yes; a step-niece, or something of that sort; not a very near relationship, but they are very intimate. She says her brother is expected in Portland Place to-morrow or the day after.’ Here Audrey gave a start. ‘Take care, my dear: the urn is running over; you are filling the teapot too full. Shall I ring for Crauford?’

No? Well, as I was saying'—rather absently, for her eyes were still following the thin stream on the tea-tray that Audrey was hurriedly wiping up—'Master Dick is expected back—and here Dora was a trifle mysterious; and then it came out that he was engaged—had been engaged for the last eight months; only the mother of his lady love had turned restive. But now things were smoother, and she hoped that they would soon be married. Poor Michael! I am afraid he has not had a very cheerful companion all these months.'

'Did Miss Abercrombie mention Michael?' asked Audrey, speaking with manifest effort. How tiresome Gage was! as though anyone wanted to hear about Dick Abercrombie's love affairs!

'Oh dear yes! and that is the worst part of all,' returned Geraldine, with the zest that is always shown by the bearer of bad news, even by a superior person like young Mrs. Harcourt. 'I had no idea Michael would play truant for so long: actually she says her brother is coming home without him! and he is going to spend the summer and autumn in Greece and the Holy Land, and perhaps winter in Algiers. In fact, Dick Abercrombie says he

does not know when he means to come back.'

'What is that you say, my dear?' asked Dr. Ross, who entered the room in time to hear the last clause. 'Were you speaking of Michael?'

'Yes, father dear.' And Geraldine willingly recapitulated the whole of her speech for his benefit. 'And I do wish someone would write and give him a good scolding for staying away so long, as though no one wanted him! And we have all been missing him so badly!'

'By-the-bye, that reminds me that I was called away just now to speak to Fergusson, and I have actually left my letter to Michael open on my study-table; and I meant it to go by this post. Do you mind just slipping it into its envelope, Audrey?—it is already directed. Thank you, my dear,' as Audrey silently left the room.

Was Dr. Ross really anxious about his letter, or had he noticed the white look on his daughter's face, and feared that others might notice it too?

Audrey never knew how long she sat before her father's study-table, neither could she have recalled a single thought that passed through her mind. A dull throbbing pain was at her

heart; the cold numbness that had crept over her as Michael had bidden her good-bye, and which kept her dumb before him, was over her now—some strange pulse seemed beating in her head. He was going still farther away from her. He was not coming back. He would never come back. Something would happen to him. She would never see his kind face again—never, never!

Perhaps this long silence had angered him—Michael, who had always been so gentle to her, on whose face she had never seen a frown! Michael had grown weary of endurance, and had given up all hope of winning her. Oh, if he had only trusted her! if he would only have believed that she would have done her very best to make him happy! How could he be so cruel to himself and to her? How could he have the heart to punish her so bitterly, as though she were to blame? Could she help her nature any more than she could help this separation from her dearest friend?

And then there came over her the deadly feeling of possible loss, and a desolation too terrible to contemplate. She had mourned very tenderly for Cyril; but if Michael died—if any ill should befall him in those distant

lands—‘ Oh, I could not bear it !’ was her inward cry. ‘ Life without Michael would be impossible,’ and as this thought flashed through her mind her eyes suddenly fell on an empty space at the end of her father’s letter. With a sudden impulse she took up the pen and wrote three words across the page in her clear, legible writing—‘ Michael, come. Audrey.’ She was almost breathless with her haste as she thrust it into the envelope, and carried it to the boy who was waiting for the letters. Then she went back to the drawing-room, for she dare not trust herself to be alone another moment. What had she done ? What would Michael think of her ? What must she think of herself ? No wonder Geraldine looked at her in surprise as she crossed the room and took up her work.

‘ What a time you have been, Audrey !’ she said, a little reproachfully. ‘ I have been waiting to bid you good-bye. Father is going to walk with me to Hillside, so Percival will not mind my being so late. How cold your face and hands are, and I am as warm as possible ! You have been running about those draughty passages, and have taken a chill. She looks pale, doesn’t she, mother ?’

‘Come, come,’ interrupted her father impatiently, ‘you must not keep me waiting any longer, Geraldine. Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, my dear.’

And for one moment Dr. Ross’s hand lay lightly on Audrey’s brown hair. Did he guess the real meaning of the girl’s downcast and sorrowful looks? And why was there a pleased smile on his face as he followed his eldest daughter out of the room?

‘I shall write to Michael and tell him to come home,’ he said to himself, as he buttoned up his great-coat. ‘I promised him that I would watch over his interests, and I shall tell him that in my opinion there is some hope for him now.’

The next few days were terrible to Audrey. More than once she feared she would be ill. She could not sleep properly. The mornings, the afternoons, the evenings, were endless to her. Mollie’s merry chatter seemed to jar on her. Her mother’s kindly commonplace remarks seemed devoid of interest, and yet above all things she dreaded to be alone. Was she growing nervous? for any sudden sound, an unaccustomed footstep, even the clanging of the door-bell, made her start, and drove the

blood from her heart. Would he write or would he telegraph? Should she hear one day that he was on his way home? Audrey was asking herself these questions morning, noon, and night. She felt as though the suspense would wear her out in time. If anyone had told Audrey that for the first time in her life she had all the symptoms that belong to a certain well-known disease—that these cold and hot fits, this self-distrustfulness and new timidity that was transforming her into a different Audrey, were only its salient features—she would have scouted the idea very fiercely. That she was in love with Michael, and that her love for Cyril was a very dim, shadowy sort of affection compared with her love for Michael, such a thought would have utterly shocked her; and yet it was the truth. Michael had always been more to her than ever she had guessed, and this long absence had taught her the unmistakable fact that she could not do without him.

Audrey struggled on as well as she could through those restless, miserable days. She would not give in; she had never given in in her life to any passing tide of emotion, and she would not be weak now. Every morning, after

a wakeful, unrefreshing night, she braced herself to meet the day's duties. She read French and German with Mollie ; she superintended her practising, and only wandered off in a dream when Mollie's scales and exercises became too monotonous. She went up to Hillside and played with Leonard in the nursery, and though Geraldine's sharp eyes discovered that something was amiss, and that Audrey was not in her usual spirits, she had the tact and wisdom not to press for an immediate confidence ; and Audrey was very grateful for this forbearance. Audrey's sturdy nature could brook no self-indulgence, and though the March winds were cold, and the Brail lanes deep in miry clay, she persisted in paying her accustomed weekly visit to Thomas O'Brien.

Mollie had a cold, and so had established a claim to remain by the fireside ; but Audrey would listen to no weak persuasion to ensconce herself comfortably in the opposite easy-chair. On the contrary, she put on her thickest boots, and, tucking up her skirts, braved wind and mud, and even a cold mizzle of rain, on her way back, and had her reward, for the walk freshened her, and in cheering her old friend she felt her own spirits revive.

She was in a happier mood as she let herself in, and shook out her wet cloak. She was in far too disreputable a state to present herself in the drawing-room; besides, she was late, and she must get ready for dinner. She ran upstairs lightly, but at the top of the staircase she suddenly stopped as though she had been turned to stone. And yet there was nothing very astonishing in the fact that a small brown dog, with very short legs, should be pattering in a cheerful manner down the corridor, or that he should utter a whine of friendly and delighted recognition when he saw Audrey; and if she stared at him as though he were some ghostly apparition, that was not Booty's fault. But the next moment she had caught him up, and had darted with him into her own room.

'Oh, Booty, Booty!' she gasped, as the little animal licked her pale face in a most feeling manner; 'to think he has come, Booty!' And if the application of a warm tongue could have given comfort and assurance, Audrey could have had plenty of both.

For a little while she could do nothing but sit there hugging the dog, and making little plaintive speeches to him, until she heard

Mollie's step at the door, and then she put him down hastily.

'Oh, Audrey dear!' exclaimed Mollie, breathless with excitement. 'Have you really got back at last? They are all asking for you. Dinner is nearly ready, and you have not begun to dress yet. And who do you think is in the drawing-room?'

For Booty, who always knew when he was not wanted, had pattered softly out of the room, thinking it high time to rejoin his master.

'Is it Michael?' asked Audrey, with her face well hidden in her wardrobe.

'To think of your guessing like that!' returned Mollie in a vexed tone. 'Whatever put Captain Burnett in your head, Audrey? Everyone else is so surprised. Mrs. Ross nearly jumped off her chair when she heard his voice. He has been here two hours, and we have all been so busy getting his room ready.'

'I am very glad he has come,' returned Audrey, trying to speak as usual; 'but now will you go down, Mollie dear? for I shall dress more quickly if you do not talk to me. You may give me my dress if you like. There, that will do.' For Mollie's chatter was unendurable.

‘How was she to go down and meet him before them all?’ she thought, as her trembling fingers bungled with the fastening. Her cheeks were burning, and yet her hands were cold as ice. Would he see how nervous she was, and how she dreaded to meet him? And yet the thought that he was there—in the house—and that in a few minutes she should hear his beloved voice, made her almost dizzy with happiness. And as she clasped the brilliant cross on her neck she hardly dare look at herself, for fear she should read her own secret in her eyes.

The gong sounded before she was ready, and she dared not linger, for fear Mollie should come again in search of her. Without giving herself time for thought, she hurried down, and stood panting a little before the drawing-room door. Yes, they were all there : her father and mother and Mollie ; and someone else—imperfectly seen through a sort of haze—was there too! Audrey never knew what word of greeting came to her lips as Michael took her hand. Her eyes were never lifted, as she felt that strong, warm pressure. His low-toned ‘I have come, Audrey,’ might mean any thing or nothing, and was met by absolute

silence on her part. Perhaps Michael felt this meeting embarrassing, for he dropped her hand in another moment and spoke to Mollie, and Audrey took refuge with her father.

But dinner was on the table, and she must take her seat opposite to him. It was Mollie who was beside him. Happily, no one spoke to her for the first few minutes. Dr. Ross was questioning Michael about his route, and Michael seemed to have a great deal to say about his journey.

Audrey recovered herself, and breathed a little more freely. He was talking to her father, and she could venture one glance at him. How well he looked! He was not so pale, and his moustache seemed darker—she had never thought him handsome before. But at this point, and as though aware of her scrutiny, Michael turned his face full on her, and a flash from the keen blue eyes made her head droop over her plate. During the rest of dinner she scarcely spoke, and more than once Mrs. Ross looked at her in some perplexity. Audrey was very strange, she thought. Had she and Michael quarrelled, that they had met so coldly, with not even a cousinly kiss after his

long absence. And now they did not speak to each other !

Dinner was later than usual that night, and the prayer-bell sounded before they left the table. Audrey whispered to Mollie to play the hymn ; but she was almost sorry she had done so when she found that Michael had no hymn-book, and she must offer him hers. He took it from her, perhaps because he noticed that her hand was not steady ; and she could hear his clear, full bass, though she could not utter a note.

He was still beside her as they left the schoolroom ; but as she was about to follow her mother and Mollie, she felt his hand on hers.

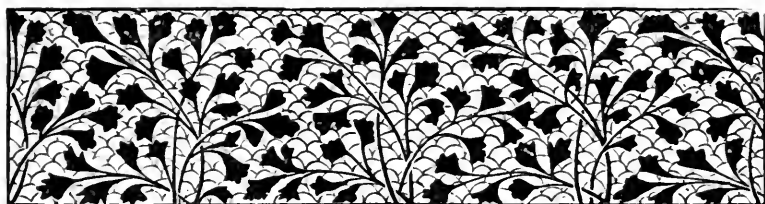
‘Come with me a moment,’ he said. ‘I want to show you something.’

And there was no resisting the firm grasp that compelled her to obey. He was taking her to her father’s study ; and there he shut the door, as though to exclude the outer world. She was trembling with the fear of what he would say to her, and how she was to answer him, when he came up to her and said, in his old familiar voice :

‘Are you never going to look at me again, Audrey ?’

Something amused, and yet caressing, in his tone made her raise her eyes, and the look that met hers said so plainly that he understood everything, that her embarrassment and shyness passed away for ever; and as he took her in his arms, with a word or two that told her of his deep inward gladness, a sense of well-being and utter content seemed to assure her that she had found her true rest at last.





CHAPTER XVII.

‘LOVE’S AFTERMATH.’

‘I seek no copy now of life’s first half :
Leave here the pages with long musing curled,
And write me new my future’s epigraph,
New angel mine, unhopèd for in the world.’

MRS. BROWNING.

NEITHER of them spoke for some minutes ; perhaps Michael’s strong emotion felt the need of silence. But presently he said in a voice that thrilled her with its tenderness :

‘Audrey, you must never be afraid of me again.’

‘I shall never need to be afraid again,’ she returned softly. ‘Oh, Michael, if you only knew how dreadful it has been all the week ! I would not go through it again for worlds.’

‘Has it been so bad as that ?’ in his old rallying tone, for he saw how greatly she was moved.

‘You have no idea how bad it was. I felt that I had done something very bold and unmaidenly in writing that postscript to father’s letter. I had longed for your return; but after that I began to dread it: I was so afraid of what you must think of me.’

‘I think you have known my opinion on that subject for a great many years,’ he replied gently. ‘If you had not been different from other girls, if you had not been immeasurably above them all in my eyes, I would never have asked you to send me that message. I knew I could rely on your perfect truth, and you have not disappointed me.’

This delicate flattery soothed her and appeased her sensitiveness. Michael watched her for a moment; then he drew up a chair to the fire in his old way.

‘You must sit there and talk to me for a little while,’ he said quietly.

And as she looked at him rather doubtfully, and suggested that her mother would be wondering at their absence, he negatived the idea at once.

‘By this time your father will have told her everything; he has been in my confidence all these months. No, they will not want us, and

I have not seen you yet—at least, you have not seen me; I am quite sure of that.' And as Audrey's dimples came into play at this remark, he very nearly made her feel shy again by saying, 'You have no idea how lovely you have grown, Audrey! Has anyone told you so, I wonder?'

'No, of course not. Who do you think would talk such nonsense to me?'

But her blush made him still more certain of the fact.

'At any rate, it is the dearest face in the world to me,' he went on, still more earnestly. 'Audrey, I think even if you had not written those three little words, I must still have come home. I could not have stayed away from you any longer.'

'If I had only known that, I might have spared myself a great deal of pain,' she replied quickly; 'but they told me that you were going to Greece and the Holy Land, and Mr. Abercrombie had come back alone, and I thought—I thought that I should never see you again.'

'I began to have the same sort of feeling myself, and then I was so tired of waiting. How long have I wanted you, Audrey?—ten or

twelve years, at least. I begin to think that there never was such a fellow for constancy.'

'Ten or twelve years! What can you mean, Michael?'

But she knew well enough what he meant, only she was woman enough to love to hear him say it.

'Oh, it was quite twelve years ago! I can remember the occasion quite well. You were in a short white frock, and you had your hair streaming over your shoulders. You were such a pretty little girl, Audrey. I admired you far more than I admired Gage, with all her regular features.'

'Oh, what nonsense, Michael!'

'Nonsense! You will tell me next that you do not remember asking me to give you a kiss. "I want to kiss you, Mike, because you are so nice and smart." Do you think I shall ever forget that? I lost my heart to you then.'

'You must not expect me to remember those things,' she returned, blushing like a rose.

'No, darling, I suppose not; you were only a child then. But, all the same, these memories are very sweet to me. You have been my one and only love, and you know that now.'

'Oh, Michael! And now the gray eyes

filled with tears, for these words sounded like a reproach to her.

'You must not misunderstand me,' he returned, shocked at her evident misconception of his words. 'Do you think that I begrudge the love you gave that poor fellow? Some day, when you are my wife, I will tell you all I think on this subject; but not now—not to-night, of all nights, when I know and feel for the first time that my treasure is in my own keeping.'

And then he stopped, and, in rather an agitated voice, begged her that he might not see tears in her dear eyes to-night.

'I did not mean to be foolish,' she returned, in a low voice; 'only, when I think of all you have suffered, and how patient you have been, and how beautifully you bore it all for our sakes, I feel as though I should never make up to you for all you have gone through. Michael'—and here her look was a little wistful—'are you sure that I shall never disappoint you—that what I have to give will content you?'

But his answer fully satisfied her on this point. He was more than content, he said; he needed no assurances of her affection—he would never need them. The first look at her face had told him all he wanted to know.

‘I think I can read your very thoughts, Audrey—that I know you better than you know yourself;’ and as Michael said this there was a smile upon his face that seemed to baffle her—a smile so penetrating and sweet that it lingered in her memory long afterwards.

And a few minutes later Michael proved the truth of his words. He was showing her the ring that he had chosen—a half-hoop of diamonds of the finest water, and their lustre and brilliancy almost dazzled Audrey.

‘I remember your love for diamonds,’ he said, as he took her hand.

But she did not answer him. She was looking rather sadly at a little pearl ring she had always worn.

‘Do not take it off!’ he said hastily, as he read the tender reluctance in her face. ‘Dear Audrey, why should not my diamonds keep company with his pearls?’ And, as her eyes expressed her gratitude, he slipped the ring into its place. ‘They will soon have to make way for another. The diamonds will make a capital guard.’

But though he evidently expected an answer to this, Audrey made no response, except to remark on the lateness of the hour; and then

Michael did consent to adjourn to the drawing-room.

They were eagerly expected and heartily welcomed, and as her father folded her in his arms with a murmured blessing, and she received her mother's tearful congratulations, Audrey felt how truly they appreciated her choice. On this occasion there were no drawbacks, no whispered fear of what Geraldine and her husband might say. Mrs. Ross begged that she might be allowed to carry the good news to Hillside. They were coming up to dinner, and she thought that it was due to them that they should be prepared beforehand; and, as everyone assented to this, Mrs. Ross started early the next morning on her delightful embassy.

But she had miscalculated the amount of pleasure that her news would impart. Geraldine cried with joy when she heard the news, and nothing would satisfy her except to put on her bonnet and walk back with her mother to Woodcote.

She interrupted a delightful *tête-à-tête* between the lovers. Not that either of them minded; for, as Michael sensibly remarked, he expected that they would have plenty of *tête-à-têtes* in

their life, and Audrey was sufficiently fond of her sister to welcome her under any circumstances.

‘How did you think I could wait until the evening?’ she said, as she threw her arms round Audrey. ‘Oh, my darling, do you know how glad I am about this? And to think that no one ever imagined it would be Michael!’ And then, as he gave her a brotherly kiss, and begged that he, too, might be congratulated, she continued earnestly: ‘Yes, indeed; and we have all been as blind and stupid as possible! And yet, when one comes to think of it, you and Audrey are cut out for each other.’

‘I was afraid you might say something about the disparity in our ages—five-and-twenty and forty; and actually I have some gray hairs already, Gage.’

‘Nonsense!’ she returned indignantly. ‘I never saw you look younger and better in your life; and as for disparity, as you call it, isn’t it just the same between Percival and myself? and can any couple be happier? If you are only as good to Audrey as Percival is to me, she will be the happiest woman in the world!’

It was a pity Mr. Harcourt could not see his wife as she made this speech, for she looked so

lovely in her matronly dignity that Michael and Audrey exchanged an admiring glance. But the climax of their success was felt to be reached when Mr. Harcourt arrived that evening.

'You have done the best day's work that ever you did in your life when you said "Yes" to Burnett!' was his first speech to Audrey; and then he had turned very red, and wrung her hand with such violence that it throbbed with pain.

'I think you ought to give her a kiss, Percy,' suggested his wife a little mischievously; for it was well known that Mr. Harcourt objected to any such demonstration, except to his own wife.

'No, thank you,' returned Audrey, stepping back. 'I am quite sure of Percival's sympathy without putting it to such a painful proof.'

'I shall kiss Audrey on her wedding-day,' replied Mr. Harcourt solemnly; 'that is, if her husband will permit me,' with a bow to Michael.

But this remark drove his sister-in-law to the other end of the room, so that she lost a certain straightforward and complimentary speech that gave a great deal of pleasure to Michael, and which he never could be induced to repeat to her.

No one could doubt Audrey's happiness after the first few days of strangeness had worn off, and she had grown used to her new position as Michael's *fiancée*. Michael had been very careful not to scare her at first—he had no wish to bring back the shyness that had made their first evening such a misery to them both—and his forbearance was rewarded when he saw the old frankness and joyousness return, and Audrey become her own sweet self again.

Michael was an ardent lover, but he was not an exacting one : Audrey could have had as much freedom as she needed during their brief engagement, but she had ceased to desire such freedom.

She remembered sometimes with faint, unavoidable regret that Cyril's demonstrativeness had at times wearied her ; but she had no such feeling with Michael : when he left her for a few days to complete the purchase of a pretty little property he had secured for their future home in one of the loveliest spots in Surrey, she was as restless during his absence as ever Geraldine had been.

Michael was surprised to find how she had missed him, and how overjoyed she was at his return ; but he never told her so, or ever

alluded to the mistake that had doomed them both to such misery.

‘My innocent darling! how could she know that I loved her, when I never told her so? It was I who would have been to blame if she had married Cyril. God grant that in that case she might never have found out her mistake; but I do not know. She would always have cared too much for Michael, and he would have found it out in time;’ but he kept such thoughts to himself.

Audrey had no objection to offer when Michael pleaded that they should be married early in August. He had waited long enough, she knew, and there was nothing to gain by waiting.

But she had a long talk with her mother and Geraldine about Mollie, whom she still regarded as her special *protégée*.

‘Michael has Kester,’ she suggested; ‘so I dare say he will not mind Mollie sharing our home.’

‘You will make a great mistake if you ask him any such question,’ returned Geraldine, in her practical, matter-of-fact way. ‘Kester will be at Oxford, and during the long vacation he will join some reading party or other—

Michael told me so; but Mollie would want a home all the year round. Why do you not leave her at Woodcote? Mother will be dreadfully dull without you at first, and, of course, I cannot always be with her. You are very fond of Mollie, are you not, mother?’

‘She is a dear, good child, and I should love to have her with me,’ was Mrs. Ross’s reply. ‘That is a clever thought of yours, my love, and Michael certainly will want his wife to himself—men always do.’

‘If you really think so, mother, and if Mollie does not mind, she shall stay at Woodcote,’ was Audrey’s reply.

And when Mollie was consulted she proved quite willing to do as they all wished.

‘Of course, dear Mrs. Ross will be dull. And I know I should only be in Captain Burnett’s way,’ argued Mollie, a little tearfully. ‘I knew that from the first. I shall miss you dreadfully, Audrey. No one will ever take your place; but I shall feel as though I were helping you somehow.’

‘Yes, and then you will pay me long visits, Mollie; and, of course, Michael will often bring me to see mother.’

And this charming prospect, and the promise

that she should be Audrey's bridesmaid, speedily consoled Mollie.

Michael had stipulated that their honeymoon should be spent in Scotland, and to Audrey's amusement Braemar was the place he finally selected, and he would have the very cottage, or rather cottages, that Dr. Ross had taken for his family.

'We can shut up some of the rooms and only use as many as we want,' he said, when Mrs. Ross had complained of the roominess. 'We are rich people, and can afford it; and as Crauford is to be Audrey's maid, she can come with us and see that things are comfortable. Do you remember that sitting-room, Audrey, and the horse-hair sofa, and the rowan-berries and heather in the big china jars? By-the-bye, you must have a gray tweed dress and a deer-stalker cap, and look as you used to look; and there is the little bridge where Gage and I used to meet you all when you had had a day's outing on the moors. Shall you not love to go there again, Audrey?'

And in answer Audrey said 'Yes' rather demurely.

But she was not demure at all when two months afterwards she sat on the little bridge

in the sunset, watching the very same ducks dibble with their yellow bills in the brook that trickled so musically over the stones, while Michael stood beside her, lazily throwing in pebbles for Booty's amusement; on the contrary, she was laughing and talking with a great deal of animation, and, strange to say, she wore the gray tweed, and the deerstalker cap was on her bright brown hair.

'We have had such a delicious day!' she was saying. 'I think there is nothing, after all, like a Scotch moor. Do look at those ducks, Michael; how angry they are with Booty, and how ridiculous they look waddling over those wet stones!'

'I was thinking of something else,' he replied; and his tone made Audrey look up rather quickly. 'Do you remember your tirade on the subject of single blessedness, my Lady Bountiful, and how freedom out-balanced all the delights of wedded bliss? I recollect we were on the moors then, and Kester was with us, and I took out my pocket-book and wrote down the date. Well, I will be magnanimous and not ask an awkward question. Six weeks of married life is not such a long time, after all.'

But she interrupted him with some impatience :

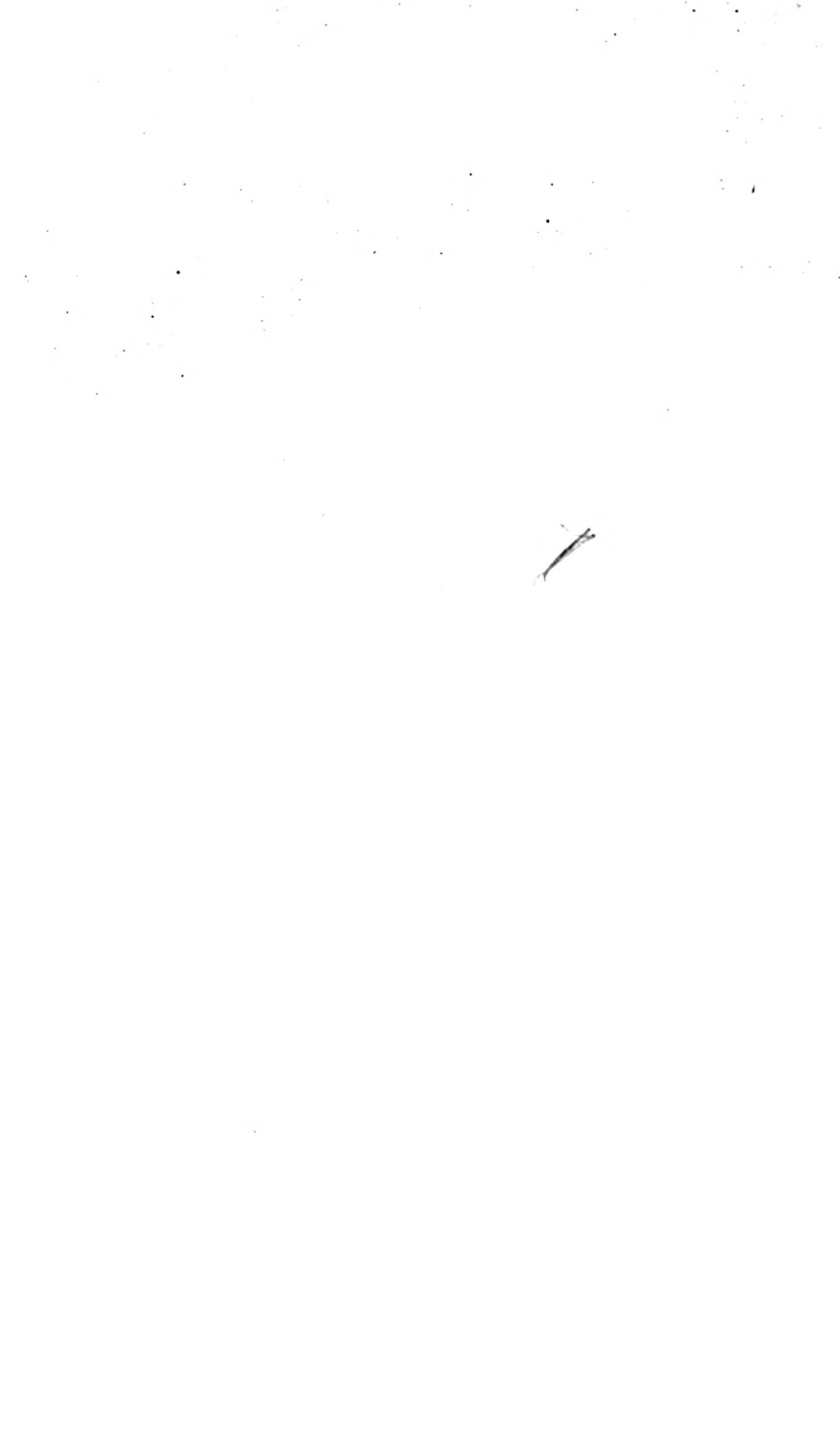
‘ Michael, how can you recall such nonsense ? But of course you are only doing it to teaze me. As though I were not much happier than I was then !’

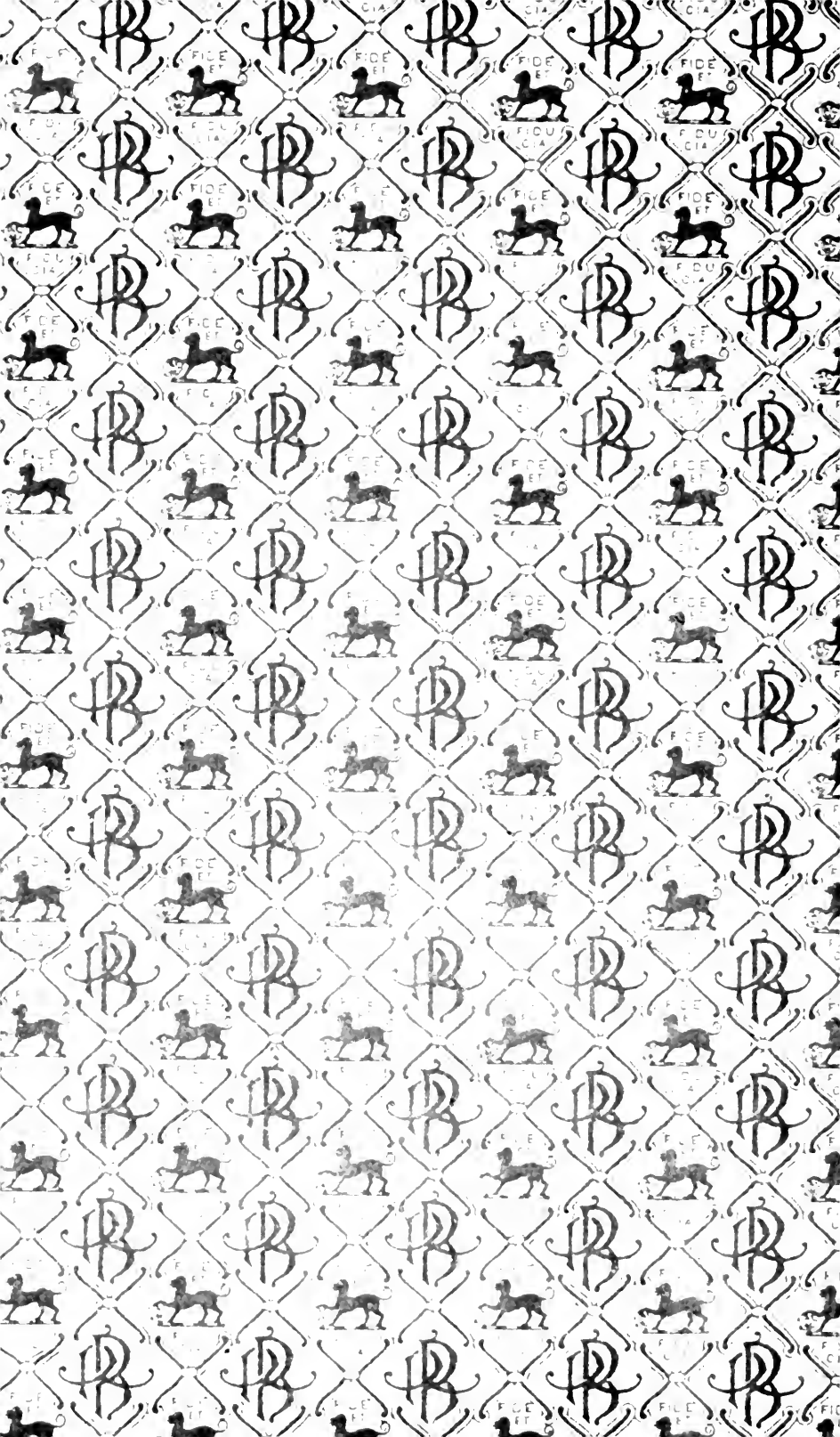
‘ Are you really happier, Audrey—really and truly, my darling ?’

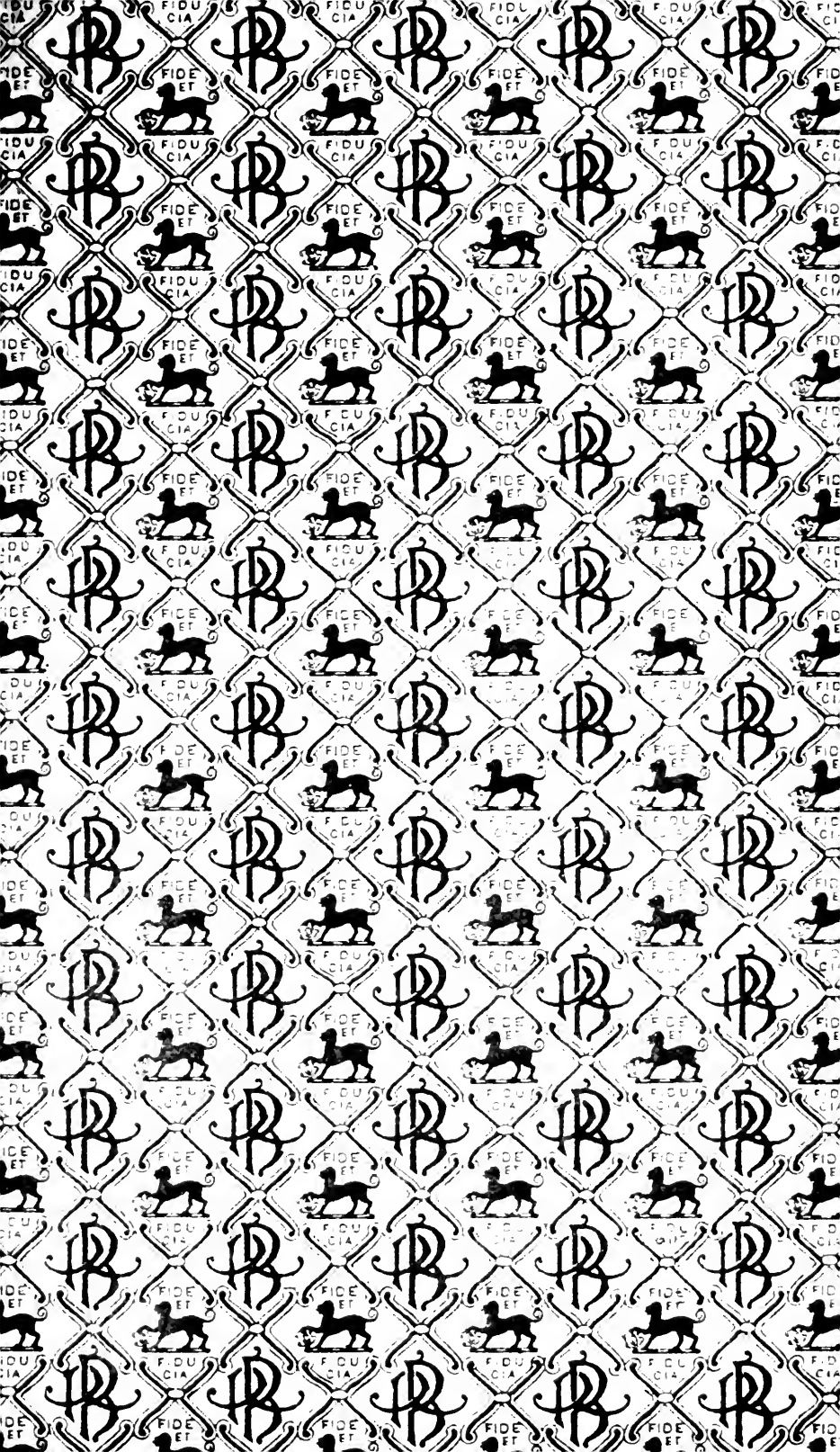
‘ Oh, Michael, what a question ! Am I not your wife ? Is not that answer enough ? Do you think I would change places with any other woman in the world, or even with my old self ?’

And as he looked at her bright face he knew that she was speaking the truth, and that Audrey Burnett so loved and revered her husband that she was likely to be a happier woman than Audrey Ross had been.

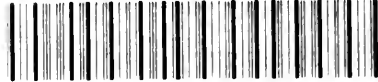
THE END.







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